



**REBIRTH OF THE THIEF
WHO ROAMED THE WORLD**
BOOK 02

Mad Snail

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Rebirth of the Thief Who Roamed The World

(重生之贼行天下)

by

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Synopsis

The world's largest VRMMO, Conviction, was almost like a second world for humanity.

It had integrated itself into the real world's economy, with both corporations and individuals seeking their fortunes through the game.

In this game, Nie Yan prided himself in his Level 180 Thief.

He could barely be considered among the top experts in the game.

Though, that was the only thing he could take pride in.

He was penniless and unable to advance in life; a situation he was forced into by the enemy of his father.

If it weren't for the little money he made by selling off items in Conviction, he would've barely been able to eat.

In the end, he chose to settle his matters once and for all.

He assassinated his father's enemy.

He lay dying shortly after being shot in the pursuit.

However, that wasn't the end of his story.

Instead, he awoke moments later to find that he had reincarnated into his past-self.

Armed with his experience and knowledge of future events, he sets out to live his life anew.

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Chapter 101 – Unknown Transfer Scroll

The King Manticore opened its maw and breathed out a black poisonous mist which enveloped Violent Waves.

“Remove Blind and Dispel on the double!” Just as Nie Yan spoke, the light from a Remove Blind spell enveloped Violent Waves. The Priests followed up on this with Dispel to clear the noxious gas, but only after the spell was cast three times did it finally disperse.

These Priests only possessed a lesser version of the Dispel spell, which was why the effects weren’t as powerful, and why it took three casts to fully expel the King Manticore’s poison. Even so, this was already considered quite good at this point in the game.

Although a small incident had occurred, the entire team was able to quickly adapt to whatever was thrown at them instead of falling into chaos thanks to Nie Yan’s leadership.

“Be careful of the stinger on the tip of the King Manticore’s tail. Violent Waves, drink an Anti-Paralysis Potion!”

Nie Yan orders were both effective and timely.

His ability at commanding the team was so great that Sleepy Fox estimated that, if they were able to defeat the King Manticore, Nie Yan’s contribution for the quest would be, at the very minimum, seventy percent or higher.

The only player who was no longer affected by the poisonous mist was Violent Waves. The surrounding five or six frontliners had all been debuffed with the blind status. Unfortunately, the Priests didn't have the leisure to cure them, so they had no choice but to hastily retreat and patiently wait for the debuff to expire on the sidelines.

“Do any of you Paladins have Purify? If you do, use it on the King Manticore!” Nie Yan's eyes swept over the Paladins, but none of them replied.

So be it... I can't expect them to have all the rare skills.

As the battle progressed, the King Manticore's health gradually fell below five percent, whereupon its fur transformed into a shade of bright red. Though this was expected, all of the team members felt their hearts sink. The Elite Manticores were already frightening enough when they became berserk. Just how terrifying would the Lord-class King Manticore become when it entered a berserk state?

The King Manticore's power was rapidly rising as its eyes became bloodshot and filled with murderous intent.

“Shadow Priest, cast Immobilize now!” Nie Yan yelled. Thanks to the prior experiences with the three Elite Manticores, the Shadow Priest already began channeling the spell as soon as he saw the King Manticore's fur turn red, so once Nie Yan gave the order, he was able to cast Immobilize on it right away.

The King Manticore suddenly halted as if it had been forcibly bound by an invisible energy.

“Throw everything you have at it!” Nie Yan yelled. He also circled behind and unleashed every skill in his arsenal on the King Manticore. Assassinate! Lacerate! Vital Strike!

Once all the Mages heard Nie Yan, they unloaded their most powerful, highest mana consuming spells on the boss such as Scorching Flame Explosion, Radiant Judgement, and so on.

The King Manticore was only momentarily paralyzed and recovered almost immediately.「Poof!」However, a pouch of Flash Powder subsequently struck it in the eye and deprived it of its vision. Thus, it could only randomly attack its surroundings in the hope of striking a few players.

Yet this crude tactic seemed effective as the King Manticore’s sharp claws streaked across three unlucky players who happened to be too close, instantly killing them. They promptly turned into streaks of light and disappeared from the map.

A berserk attack that dealt three hundred percent damage, no player would be able to survive if they were struck by such.

The King Manticore was akin to a headless fly as it chaotically thrashed around its surroundings. Once the effects of the Flash Powder wore off, however, another perfectly timed pouch exploded in front of its eyes, blinding it yet again.

During such a crucial moment, Nie Yan definitely wouldn't be stingy with items.

“Frontliners, quickly retreat!” Nie Yan yelled. He evaded the blindly attacking King Manticore. After being deprived of its sight by the Flash Powder, it let out a rage filled roar, but sadly had no targets to attack.

Just as it began regaining its sight, Nie Yan robbed it of its vision once more by lobbing another pouch of Flash Powder at its eyes.

During this time, the King Manticore's health had fallen to two percent. It angrily roared as a constant barrage of magic rained down on its body.

Despite being blinded, none of the team members dared to approach the boss. Its violent rage and frenzied attacks were incredibly terrifying. Occasionally, several unlucky players would end up cornered by the King Manticore and killed in an instant without any suspense.

However, Nie Yan remained the only player who hadn't retreated. He had to carefully maintain the distance between himself and the King Manticore in order to be in range to throw another pouch of Flash Powder once the previous one wore off. He needed to stay close to the King Manticore, but not so close that he'd end up swatted to death.

After having thrown three pouches of Flash Powder, Nie Yan quickly retreated and retrieved a Sheep Transformation Scroll

from his bag.

The Flash Powder would no longer be effective on the King Manticore after being used three times in a row.

“Mages, stop attacking. Anyone who needs to restore their mana, drink your Mana Potions now!” As soon as Nie Yan spoke, all of the Mages immediately stopped firing their spells. None of them doubted his orders. Even those who were in the middle of chanting their spells stopped.

「Poof!」The giant King Manticore transformed into a sheep!

The transformation could buy the Mages some much needed time to replenish their mana and allow their spells to come off cooldown.

As soon as those two seconds passed, the King Manticore promptly returned to its original form, and the Mages resumed firing their spells.

The transformation spell lost its effect. The King Manticore would become immune to Sheep Transformation and Web just like how Flash Powder had lost its effectiveness when it was used too often.

Nie Yan no longer had any cards up his sleeves to restrict the boss' movements. Although the King Manticore only had one percent of its health remaining, its attacks were too powerful. In

this berserk state, even Violent Waves wouldn't be able to withstand a single strike, let alone any other members in the team.

“Mages, spread out quickly. Don't stop firing your spells. How many of you survive will solely depend on luck,” Nie Yan said. At this point in time, the low health boss would instantly kill any player unlucky enough to cross its path. Whoever it aggroed onto would be in immediate peril as well. Fortunately, it only had less than one percent health remaining. Under the constant barrage of magic, the King Manticore would fall in fifteen seconds at most.

No matter what occurred, Nie Yan believed they could drag this battle out for at least fifteen seconds. During which, the King Manticore would only be able to kill three players in the worst cast scenario.

The King Manticore locked onto a nearby Paladin who immediately panicked upon noticing he had taken aggro. He turned tail and began fleeing for his life but how could he possibly outrun the berserk boss? The King Manticore instantly overtook him and killed him with a single swipe of its paw. Then it turned its head to the next target which of course was Nie Yan.

God dammit! Why is it me, you stupid overgrown cat!

Without a moment's hesitation, Nie Yan crushed a Basic Haste Scroll and began sprinting towards an area that was full of shrubbery, hoping to use the terrain to elude the boss.

Despite the speed boost from the scroll, the King Manticore still

managed to quickly close the distance and pounce at him. As soon as Nie Yan saw the King Manticore mid-pounce, he activated his Ring of Woven Silk and shot out a web line towards a nearby tree, instantly pulling himself in another direction.

By the time the King Manticore slammed into the ground and changed directions to continue its pursuit, Nie Yan had already run quite a far distance away.

However, the berserk King Manticore quickly caught up to him once again. Once it neared his back, it raised its gigantic paws and swiped down. It seemed this was going to be the final moment before Nie Yan was killed.

Nie Yan dodged to the side as the King Manticore's claws streaked down, barely missing his chest.

As the claws almost grazed him, Nie Yan shifted to the King Manticore's flank and struck it with a Concussive Blow.

The attack momentarily stunned the King Manticore, leaving it unable to retaliate. Of course, during this period, the Mages had never stopped casting their spells. Magic had been constantly bombarding the King Manticore's body throughout this entire course of events.

Using this opportunity he had created with Concussive Blow, Nie Yan jumped back and hastily retreated.

「Bang! Bang! Bang!」A final round of spells struck the King Manticore and shaved away its last bit of remaining health. At long last, it collapsed to the ground, having been drained of all of its health.

Nie Yan sighed a breath of deep relief. He had almost been turned into mincemeat by the King Manticore's final attack. Fortunately, he had good reaction speed and managed to dodge in time.

In accordance with the King Manticore's death, a bright radiance enveloped Nie Yan. The kill had given him enough experience to not only reach Level 7 but also filled his experience bar by thirty-six percent.

The King Manticore dropped four items: a single scroll, a Level 0 Dark Gold chestplate, and two Fortune Gems. Making sure to leave nothing behind, Nie Yan also stripped the King Manticore's body for materials.

「System: You've obtained King Manticore's Eyes. Gatherer +35 Experience」

“It's finally done. Now let's return and hand in the quest. Also, according to our agreement, this Unknown Transfer Scroll will go to me,” Nie Yan said. The reason he was willing to run Agmota Muddy Swamplands was mostly for this scroll. The Unknown Transfer Scroll only needed two seconds to channel. Once activated, it would instantly teleport the user two hundred to a thousand meters away from their original location. With this, he would be able to retrieve his second chapter from the Book of Order.

Chapter 102 – Invitation Declined

“We’ve already taken too much. You used up a lot of Flash Powder and scrolls during that fight, didn’t you? I’m sure they weren’t cheap. So here, these Fortune Gems should go to you as well,” Sleepy Fox said. He already felt extremely satisfied after obtaining the Dark Gold Fighter’s chestplate, so he didn’t mind passing on the Fortune Gems since they weren’t worth much in comparison.

Nie Yan thought for a moment and said, “If you insist, then it would be rude of me to refuse,” before accepting the Fortune Gems. After all, although he already had a few in his possession, he could always use more to upgrade his gear.

“Sosil Valley opens tomorrow. Do you want to run it together?” asked Sleepy Fox as he looked at Nie Yan.

Nie Yan shook his head and replied, “No, I’m not really interested right now, but we’ll see in the future.”

“Ah, alright then...” Since Nie Yan wasn’t willing, Sleepy Fox couldn’t really force him. Thus, all he could do was sigh and lament over the fact that he couldn’t bring such an exceptional Thief with him to the new dungeon.

With the new dungeon opening, Nie Yan definitely didn’t want to attract too much attention to himself. Otherwise, he might really end up arousing the suspicion of others. They would wonder if he was a Game Master. How else would he already know how to beat a

new dungeon that just opened?

Having completed the dungeon, Nie Yan led Sleepy Fox and the rest of the team back to Nate by taking a shortcut through some thickets.

When they arrived back at the mayor's residence, Nie Yan entered the mansion by himself, and as he stepped into the mayor's room, a cutscene began playing.

「You hand over the King Manticore's Eyes to one of the town's residents, Ross, who in turn cries out in surprise and elation. “Oh thank the heavens! This is too unbelievable! Are these really the King Manticore's Eyes? The mayor can be saved!” Ross takes the King Manticore's Eyes and grinds them into a fine powder before feeding it to the mayor, alleviating the poison in his body. You have earned the respect of Nate's inhabitants.」

「System: The Influence of all team members in Nate has increased by 6.」

「System: For your contribution in the team, you have earned 2,200 Reward Points.」

「System: Holy Empire has earned 3,300 Honour.」

「System: You have received 23,000 experience points and 12 silvers.」

Specialist dungeons always gave out generous rewards. The A.I. system in the game would evaluate each member's performance during the run and distribute their rewards accordingly. Although Nie Yan's contribution was undoubtedly the highest among the team, the other members received ample compensation as well.

Nie Yan glanced at his experience bar, Level 7 and seventy-six percent of the way filled, and he couldn't help but exclaim in admiration, "I'm levelling so quickly!" He already surpassed Sleepy Fox, who after receiving the quest rewards was only at sixty-two percent.

There were still thirty minutes until the servers shut down. Since Nie Yan wanted to get a few things done before then, he quickly traded two Flash Powders to Sleepy Fox for a silver each and said, "Alright, I'll be taking my leave first then."

"Alright, let's contact each other some other time. Oh, wait! Other than the Flash Powder, do you have anymore of those Sheep Transformation Scrolls and Web Scrolls? If so, would you be willing to sell some to me?" Sleepy Fox asked.

"Sorry, I don't have any more on me, but I can mail you some when I resupply. It's fine if you just give me three silver per scroll," Nie Yan replied.

Nie Yan certainly didn't plan on selling these scrolls for such a low price when listing them on the marketplace.

"Deal!" Sleepy Fox readily agreed. Sheep Transformation Scrolls

and Web Scrolls were extremely useful. Let alone three silver per scroll, he would still be willing if it were four or even five silver!

The rewards from this dungeon run were rather decent, especially since Nie Yan was able to obtain the Unknown Transfer Scroll. In his eyes, this was tantamount to receiving a ticket for a free chapter from the Book of Order.

Sleepy Fox was quite puzzled about one thing. Why did Nie Yan seem so uninterested in everything except for the Unknown Transfer Scroll? To the best of his knowledge, the item didn't have much use outside of certain situations. However, as curious as he might be, he knew better than to pry into another person's business.

Finished, the silhouette of Nie Yan's back gradually disappeared within the busy streets.

"Guild Leader, he wasn't willing to join our guild?" Dusk asked. He happened to overhear Nie Yan and Sleepy Fox discussing this topic in private, but he didn't learn about any of the specifics.

"Sigh... no, he wasn't willing. I even offered him a position as an Honorary Officer in the guild too. It was a role with minimum restrictions yet he still declined. He probably thinks our little temple is too small to host a deity like him! Ahh, what a pity...! I wonder how high he'll be able to climb in the future." Sleepy Fox's expression turned serious. "We definitely shouldn't make an enemy out of him."

“Yeah, it is a pity,” Dusk sighed in agreement. If a player like Nie Yan were to join their guild, their influence and achievements would undoubtedly soar to new heights.

Flying Stone, who happened to be standing nearby, was left dumbstruck when he eavesdropped on their conversation. Sleepy Fox was actually willing to make him an Honorary Officer in Holy Empire? It must be understood, this was actually one of the highest ranking positions in the guild which only answered to the Guild Leader, yet Nie Yan was surprisingly uninterested! He couldn't help but feel a sense of great pity for Nie Yan. Truthfully, when speaking for himself, he didn't have any high aspirations in terms of climbing the guild's ladder. He felt membership as an Honorary Officer in Holy Empire was already quite terrific.

Seven Nights also happened to overhear the conversation, and he inwardly sighed. Now this was truly a Thief at the pinnacle. Just how long would it take for him to finally reach Nie Yan's level where the guild leader would attach such importance to him?

Nie Yan on the other hand certainly didn't feel a great sense of loss over passing up the opportunity. He casually passed through Nate's transfer point and teleported back to Calore where he proceeded to Trembling Milo's House to purchase twenty-six pouches of Flash Powder, thirty Web Scrolls, and thirty Sheep Transformation Scrolls. Finished acquiring merchandise, he sent a few of each to Sleepy Fox through the mail, then continued to the auction house.

There were quite a few players still roaming around the auction house, so he started looking around for a spot to set up his stall.

Scanning the area, he finally found one and sat down, but only a moment later, he suddenly received a call.

「Nie Yan! It's me, Yao Yao. Where are you right now?」She happened to notice Nie Yan was currently in Calore on her friends list, which was why she called him and asked.

「I'm at the auction house.」

「Ah! What a surprise~ I'm there as well! ...Wait, I see you! I'm right over here! Come over and meet me.」Yao Yao had stood up and began looking around. Eventually, her eyes came across Nie Yan who happened to be sitting by a corner. She began jumping up and down, waving for him to come over.

Yao Yao resembled a snow lotus in bloom in her pure white robes. Her sweet, pleasant smile was able to put any man's heart at ease.

Such a cheerful, beautiful young lady couldn't help but attract the attention of onlookers. The surrounding crowd completely froze in place as they were rendered dumbstruck by her brilliant smile.

Noticing the peculiar gazes of the crowd, Yao Yao finally realized how much attention she was attracting. In response, she stuck out her tongue at Nie Yan and hastily sat back down.

Nie Yan couldn't help but force out a wry smile when such a

scene played out before him. He got up from his corner and began walking over to Yao Yao.

When he finally reached her side, he noticed that sitting next to her were two other girls, both around nineteen years old. One of the two was an Elementalist, and her appearance could be considered beautiful. She wore heavy makeup, revealing robes, and radiated a somewhat seductive charm. Nie Yan, however, didn't find these types of girls particularly attractive. The other girl was a Priest who resembled a pretty daughter from a humble background. Her lovely appearance gave the impression that she was naturally agreeable and pleasant, the kind who would leave others with a good opinion after a single glance.

Nie Yan activated Transcendent Insight. The Elementalist was named Feiyun Liushui (Humble Charm of Flowing Water) while the Priest was named Moon Child.

When he sat down with Yao Yao and the girls, Nie Yan sensed the jealous gazes filled with murderous intent of the players in the crowd piercing through his back, so he couldn't help but bitterly smile. There was an expression known as femme fatale; this was an example of such.

"These two are my classmates. She's called Feiyun, and this is Moon Child. They're extremely beautiful so try not to fall for them~" teased Yao Yao as she pointed at the two girls by her side and introduced them with a coy smile.

"Yao Yao, the only beauty here is you!" Moon Child pulled Yao Yao's arm and had a very gentle smile on her face.

“Nice to meet you,” Nie Yan greeted Feiyun Liushui and Moon Child.

“Hello,” Moon Child smiled and greeted back with a gentle nod.

Chapter 103 – Paying In Installments

“Oh, so this is the guy you’ve been talking about...? He looks a little frail and weak, plus he isn’t nearly as handsome as Little Rui. Besides... we don’t even know if he’s as good a player as you’ve been telling us,” Feiyun gave Nie Yan an uncaring glance as she uttered in an unkind tone.

Her blatant rudeness made Nie Yan wrinkle his brows.

“Feiyun!” Moon Child berated her friend, then looked to Nie Yan apologetically and said, “I’m really sorry. Please don’t mind her. She’s actually a good person at heart.”

Nie Yan just smiled at Moon Child and nodded his head. Although he felt slighted, it wasn’t worth his time to get into a squabble with such a girl.

「Nie Yan, I’m really sorry... Feiyun is a classmate of ours and wanted to come as well. To be honest, I’m not too fond of her, but since Moon Child didn’t want to be rude, we let her tag along. Moon Child is a good friend of mine, but one of her quirks is that she doesn’t want to offend anyone. If it were only me, Feiyun would be long gone,」Yao Yao whispered to Nie Yan, seemingly seething with anger.

「Haha, when it comes to these kinds of people, it’s best to just ignore them,」Nie Yan replied.

With this in mind, Nie Yan no longer paid any heed to Feiyun. He

instead directed his attention to Yao Yao and Moon Child and said, “I need to sell a few things here first, I’ll chat more once I’m done.”

“Alright, go ahead!” replied Moon Child as she smiled. Her gentle expression could easily melt any man’s heart.

Nie Yan sat down nearby and began focusing on his own business. When Feiyun noticed that Nie Yan was purposefully ignoring her, she became so mad that her gums itched and her blood boiled.

The four sat in a spot across from the auction house. Moon Child and Yao Yao were giggling and gossiping in hushed tones. Occasionally, Feiyun would interject with a few comments of her own, usually fawning over their appearance. When near these two, she could only serve as a part of the background to highlight their beauty.

“It’s the truth! He really is a skilled expert!” Yao Yao turned her head and nudged Nie Yan. “Tell them! You are an expert, right?”

“Really?” Moon Child asked in a somewhat doubtful tone. She just couldn’t imagine it.

Nie Yan lightly chuckled and modestly replied, “I’m only so-so.”

“Do you think you’re as skilled as our Little Rui...? Please, stop overestimating yourself. Little Rui has always liked Yao Yao. Don’t think you have even the slightest chance with her. You’re far from

being worthy,” Feiyun commented in a harsh, mocking tone while barely glancing at him. It was as though she believed it was beneath her to look at Nie Yan for too long,

Nie Yan couldn't be bothered to pay attention to this girl's stereotypical words. He reached into his bag and grabbed three pouches of Flash Powder, two Web Scrolls, and two Sheep Transformation Scrolls, listing them all up for auction.

He set one silver as the starting price for the Flash Powders while the Web Scrolls and Sheep Transformation Scrolls were four silver each. Although the little he had in his bag wouldn't have much effect on the marketplace, he hoped that, by selling them at a high price, he would be able to profit more in the long run. Even though it would sell relatively slowly, he would be able to earn quite a bit and would avoid arousing too much suspicion at the same time. The last thing he wanted was to draw attention to them by suddenly flooding the market with these rare items.

Nie Yan's lack of response quickly bored Feiyun, so she scoffed and soon turned her gaze elsewhere.

The purpose of placing these items in the auction house was to gauge the market's response. Consumables that could sell for such a high price were few in number. Furthermore, they would only be bought by the players who were well-off. In the end, this was just a test to see if these players were actually willing to spend the money.

Just moments after Nie Yan listed these items for auction, someone already increased the bid on one of the items. In fact, a

bidding frenzy erupted for all three. However, this wasn't all too surprising. At this stage in the game, there weren't many Mage players who were able to create scrolls. Not to mention, the majority of Mages chose not to learn Spell Scribing, so the more widely available scrolls only came from NPC shops. Unfortunately, they all contained low-level spells like Fireball and would cost an arm and a leg to purchase. Control spells such as Sheep Transformation and Web were extremely rare in scroll form. After all, these spells could practically guarantee victory when fighting other players, which was why they were considered so useful. Aside from that, the scrolls were also great lifesavers since they could be used to flee when encountering a dangerous situation. Besides, to those rich players, a few silvers was merely pocket change. Therefore, the bids on the scrolls only gradually climbed higher and higher.

At the very end of the bidding war, each pouch of Flash Powder sold for two silvers while the Sheep Transformation Scrolls and Web Scrolls sold for around five silvers per scroll. For being so early in the game's life, selling at these prices was terrific. Nie Yan had once again earned a sizable profit. Sure enough, the ocean of game knowledge he had amassed from his past life was an ocean of wealth as well.

Nie Yan's items caused a great stir in the auction house. Many players were secretly inquiring about them. Just who in the world was actually able to create Sheep Transformation Scrolls and Web Scrolls? At the same time, many others were inquiring about the Flash Powder as well.

With how well they sold, he continued emptying his bag of Flash Powder, Sheep Transformation Scrolls, and Web Scrolls.

Naturally, the more money he earned the better.

“Yao Yao, look at this Eroding Fire Staff that Little Rui gave me as a present. It’s a Silver weapon that boosts Intelligence by six and magic damage by seven! What do you think?” Feiyun took out the staff and waved it around with the intention of showing it off.

Since the game had barely been open for two weeks, a Silver staff could be considered an amazing weapon, let alone one that increased Intelligence and damage as well.

“My staff is Silver as well, but its properties aren’t as good as yours,” Yao Yao replied frankly. She didn’t display much envy in her tone or expression.

“You know, if you asked Little Rui for one, he’d definitely give you an even better staff. He’s had a crush on you for so long, so shouldn’t you respond by now?” Feiyun stared at Yao Yao and asked.

Nie Yan overheard their conversation. It seemed Feiyun had been bribed to be a mouthpiece.

The person Nie Yan cared for the most in his heart was Xie Yao. In spite of that, although his affection for Yao Yao wasn’t etched deeply into his heart, he still cared for her greatly.

Feiyun had treated him rudely despite being a friend of an acquaintance. And at the same time, she was also constantly trying

to pair Yao Yao up with another guy right in front of him... Even Buddha had limits to what he could tolerate!

When he saw the bored expression on Yao Yao's face, he suddenly understood this wasn't a one-time event.

"Yao Yao, I have an extra staff laying around. It would go to waste sitting in my bag, so why don't I give it to you as a present instead," Nie Yan interrupted when he noticed Feiyun was about to urge her on some more.

"Hey, brat! Don't you know interrupting people in the middle of their conversation is incredibly rude? It's better if you leave that garbage inside your bag instead of trying to present it as a gift. It'll save you from some embarrassment!" Feiyun said in a disdainful manner.

"Well, do you realize when others aren't interested in hearing you talk, it's incredibly rude to chatter on like a squawking hen?" Nie Yan replied, showing no trace of politeness in his tone.

"You...!"

"What kind of staff? Show it to me!" Yao Yao intentionally ignored Feiyun's earlier ramblings.

Nie Yan took out the [Staff of Moonlight Worship](#) and handed it to Yao Yao. "This is my gift to you. No need to be shy."

“Ah~! This is a Gold staff!” Yao Yao exclaimed. She clearly understood just how valuable a Gold-grade Staff was at present!

“Yao Yao, let me see. What Gold staff?” Moon Child asked in a doubtful tone.

Yao Yao shared the Staff of Moonlight Worship’s properties with the two other girls. Moon Child stared at Nie Yan in shock. She didn’t believe Nie Yan would actually give away a Gold-grade staff. However, Feiyun’s reaction was even more amusing to behold. Her complexion paled, and her expression immediately turned incredibly ugly. If this Staff of Moonlight Worship was trash, then what did the staff in her hand count as?

“Nie Yan, I’m really angry with you! What do you mean, ‘It would go to waste sitting in my bag so why don’t I give it to you as a present?’ It seems you’re tossing it away like it’s actually trash! However... I really do like this present! Thank you!” Yao Yao said with a faint smile, but then she sent him a whisper, 「I know you’re only putting on an act to shut that annoying person up, but I really do like this staff. Is it possible for me to keep it? I’m willing to pay in installments.」

「No need. I actually am giving it to you as a gift. It’s just a staff, after all.」From Nie Yan’s point of view, the Gold Staff wasn’t really worth much. It became even more negligible when compared to their friendship.

「Nie Yan, do you think you’re some kind of rich young master? This is a Gold-grade staff! How would it be alright if I didn’t pay for it!」

Nie Yan laughed. He understood her personality and knew full well just how stubborn she could get.「Fine, you win. You can pay in installments. Just give me a silver every month until you pay it back in full. How does that sound?」

「Good! Then that's settled. Only idiots would act politely with a rich moneybag like you!」After getting her way, Yao Yao revealed a triumphant expression on her face before finally giving way to a charming smile.

Chapter 104 – Preparing For The Future

Nie Yan forced out a smile.「Oh, then you're telling me you're not being foolish right now...?」

Moon Child and Feiyun were shocked beyond belief when they saw Yao Yao had actually accepted the gift. They both understood Yao Yao's disposition as she generally never took gifts from others, especially from males. Even on her birthday, she would only accept simple things like birthday cards. Today though, she actually accepted a gift, and from a male no less! There was definitely a hidden story behind this!

「Yao Yao, what's your relationship with this person?」Moon Child whispered.

「He's a good friend of mine,」Yao Yao replied with a somewhat guilty conscience.

「Really? Just a good friend eh~?」Moon Child asked in a mischievous tone. The expression on her face showed that she didn't believe her friend in the slightest.

「Really! He's just a friend!」Afraid Moon Child would continue down this line of questioning, Yao Yao decided to put up a bold front and expressed herself clearly. While her impression of Nie Yan was undeniably favourable, it certainly wasn't to the extent of love or anything deep like that.

What Yao Yao was unaware of, however, was the special place

she held in Nie Yan's heart. Although he buried the events of his past life deep within the recesses of his mind, memories and emotions like those weren't so easily erased.

「Alright, if you say he's only a good friend, then that's fine too,」 Moon Child giggled. She seemed to have caught on to something.

“Moon Child, Yao Yao, I have some business to take care of, so I'll be taking my leave now.” Feiyun was feeling quite bored since she was being ignored by Nie Yan, and Yao Yao and Moon Child were chatting in private, so she decided to get up and say goodbye.

“Feiyun, take care.” Moon Child waved her farewell.

Yao Yao acted a bit cold and detached, simply acknowledging that she was leaving.

Meanwhile, Nie Yan completely disregarded her existence. This cold-shoulder treatment only served to infuriate Feiyun even more, and by the time she left, she was seething with venomous hatred.

Following Feiyun's departure, the group continued to chat for a brief while, during which even the girls sold a few items of their own as well.

“Nie Yan, we're going to head off here. Big Sis Yu Lan (Blue Feather) is trying to get some last minute levelling in, and she wants us to hurry over,” Yao Yao said after checking the new

messages in her chat.

“No problem. Let’s chat some other time then,” Nie Yan replied before waving them goodbye.

Afterwards, he checked his system notifications.

「System: Your Flash Powder x1 has sold for 2 silver, 10 copper.」

「System: Your Flash Powder x1 has sold for 2 silver, 5 copper.」

「System: Your Sheep Transformation Scroll x1 has sold for 5 silver, 20 copper.」

The money in Nie Yan’s bag rapidly piled up. Only by limiting the Flash Powder, Web Scrolls, and Sheep Transformations Scrolls he placed on the auction house, would he be able to sell them for a sufficiently high price. Although unique items appeared in the auction house all the time, they were often so expensive that only a few players would be willing to buy them. On the other hand, if he sold too many of them, it would gradually lead to oversaturation.

Several minutes prior to the servers shutting down, Nie Yan had sold eight pouches of Flash Powder, six Web Scrolls, and five Sheep Transformation Scrolls, earning him around fifty silver. During this time, he also visited several small towns to purchase Bat Teeth, only to discover that not many players were willing to sell to him. It appeared the information about Blacksmith Kade purchasing Bat Teeth had somehow been leaked, so all the players

were selling their Bat Teeth to Kade instead. Since there's no more money to be made, so be it... I've found two other ways to earn money anyway.

For the time being, he could earn money by selling Flash Powder, Web Scrolls, and Sheep Transformation Scrolls. Then, when the price and demand for Black Phenol soared, he would gradually distribute his supply of that into the marketplace as well.

Before Nie Yan went offline, he once again emptied the marketplace of all Black Phenol, Black Phenol Recipes, and the alchemy ingredients required to craft Black Phenol. After taking note of his stock, he counted eight hundred bottles of Black Phenol, three thousand and two hundred Black Phenol alchemy ingredients, and two hundred and twenty Black Phenol Recipes. Due to his crazy purchasing, the marketplace was nearly devoid of Black Phenol, which resulted in their price increasing. However, since there was no one competing with him to purchase these items, the price didn't rise by much. Therefore, he was still able to purchase everything relatively cheap.

These Black Phenol Recipes were the most crucial part of his plans. The amount in his possession was already enough to influence the market for Black Phenol for some time to come. In his past life, before Sosil Valley opened, the price of these recipes weren't expensive at all. However, after the dungeon was released, many Alchemists started to notice the growing demand for Black Phenol and rushed to purchase the recipes in order to enter that market. Even then, the quantity of Black Phenol produced was far from meeting the demand of the countless teams running the dungeon. As a consequence, the price of Black Phenol and its recipes clambered up accordingly.

Yet, at present, all of the recipes on the market had unexpectedly disappeared. In other words, the market suddenly lost over two hundred and twenty Alchemists who could produce a steady supply of Black Phenol. With such a sudden shortage in supply during a time of high demand, the price of Black Phenol was certain to soar much higher than it did in his past life.

In this fashion, Nie Yan was almost guaranteed to make a killing off the monopoly he would hold on the Black Phenol market.

Plus, two weeks after Sosil Valley opens, a new Level 5 dungeon called Medusa's lair would be released. The guilds who wanted to get an advantage over others would definitely seize the opportunity to enter the dungeon and get a head start. In this instance, the monsters possessed attacks that could petrify their enemies, so when the dungeon is added in, the demand for consumables and equipment that could prevent or resist petrification would definitely increase. From this point forward, he would slowly stockpile items and equipment with such properties.

Nie Yan glanced at his inventory. He currently had sixty-three silvers to his name. In the early stages of the game, this was already quite terrific, especially considering he was only Level 7. In the game's present state, a single silver could buy a lot. Even the most expensive Gold-grade equipment was no more than thirty to forty silvers.

Having obtained so many items, Nie Yan tidied up his bag and personal storage, which currently contained rows upon rows of

Black Phenol, recipes, and ingredients. After neatly organizing them, it was a rather spectacular sight to behold. The personal storage offered two hundred slots of space for free. Any additional space would require the player to pay rent, one copper a day for every two hundred slots. Nie Yan had rented over five thousand additional slots to store all his items, which amounted to twenty-five coppers a day. However, by now, he had already accumulated so much wealth that this little amount of money was practically negligible to him.

After finishing all his business in game, Nie Yan finally logged off, just as the servers were about to shut down.

When he took off the game helmet, he left his room and headed to his kitchen. There, he took a tube of nutrition tonic out of the fridge and sat near the dinner table. As he drank the tube, he let his eyes wander over his shabby room. From the aged walls to the old chandelier that had collected dust and grease, they all gave him a sense of familiarity and comfort.

He hadn't received any news from his parents in quite a while now. Thankfully, he already knew the truth and the reason for their disappearance, so he no longer blamed them. For the sake of securing a better life for their family, they were braving great dangers and risking their lives. What right did he have to criticize or fault them?

If his parents took the risk of contacting him, what would certainly await them was death. Thus, he could only suppress his emotions and patiently wait for news of their return.

After finishing the nutrition tonic, Nie Yan proceeded with his daily training, improving his strength, agility, and reaction speed.

Wearing the helmets also had another beneficial effect. During the night, they would send electrical signals through the body, stimulating the nerves, nurturing cells, and allowing the muscles to always be in an active growing state, and the results of a day's training wouldn't disappear even after a night's rest. In other words, one day of exercise in the present was the equivalent to ten days of exercise for a person in the past.

More recently, his training method was efficient, and his body's nutritional needs were taken care of as well. So in these past few days, he had experienced a substantial growth in muscle. His stature was rapidly growing as well, becoming robust and tall. Eighteen years old was a time of growth for a person's body, and at present, his body was transforming by the day!

「Bam! Bam! Bam!」A hard knocking sound came from the front door.

Nie Yan listened carefully. The soundproofing on the house door wasn't great, so from the messy sound of footsteps, he determined there were at least five or six people outside the door.

Chapter 105 – Hatred And Desire For Revenge

“That kid isn’t home?” A hoarse voice passed through the door and entered Nie Yan’s ears.

Nie Yan wrinkled his brows upon hearing this voice, and anger began bubbling forth from inside him. The voice belonged to his first uncle from his mother’s side, a person he loathed with a burning passion. When his parents had borrowed money from relatives and friends, his uncle had been the stingiest. Later on, when his father started a successful business, they used the fact that they had lent him money as leverage to coerce him into giving them a twenty percent stake, turning his father’s own business into a family one. They took money but never worked to earn it back and constantly misappropriated the company’s funds. Thankfully, Nie Yan’s father had always been strict and caught on quickly, preventing the situation from worsening. Though, after the business began expanding into Conviction, a crisis suddenly emerged. Initially, his father only allowed thirty percent of the shares to be sold in order to safeguard the company from any mergers or acquisitions. Yet it was these exact friends and relatives cooperating with Cao Xu, backstabbing his father, that led to him losing control of the company. In the end, his father became clinically depressed and was eventually forced to bow out from managing the business.

After travelling back to the past, although the hatred he felt for Cao Xu remained deep-rooted in his very being, it had nevertheless diminished significantly. This world had always been one where the strong preyed upon the weak. If his family didn’t have the strength to defend themselves, granted even if Cao Xu didn’t make

a move, some other bigshot would have acquired his father's business instead. Taking this into consideration, the people Nie Yan resented the most were the friends and relatives who betrayed his father!

Backstabbed by his close friends and relatives... There was nothing else that contributed more to his father falling into deep depression.

「BAM! BAM! BAM!」The knocking on the door changed into heavy pounding, and he could easily sense the anger behind these sounds.

Nie Yan walked over to the door and opened it, whereupon five familiar faces entered his eyes.

“Oh, what a surprise! Uncles, aunties, you all came! Mr. Lin, you're here as well?”¹ Nie Yan swept over his relatives as his expression filled with an increasing amount of derision and contempt with each passing moment. When his gaze finally fell upon a middle-aged man in the back, however, there was actually a hint of respect that lit up in his eyes. Nie Yan could roughly guess why his relatives had come knocking at the door. After all, his parents had borrowed quite a sum of money from numerous friends and family. It was within expectations that these four showed up at his doorstep, demanding repayment; however, Mr. Lin's arrival was rather unexpected and puzzling.

Lin Ya was his father's old friend from the army. When their family had been in dire straits, he had been one of the few people who never abandoned them. Even during the betrayal at his

father's company, he hadn't been present. From what Nie Yan could remember, Mr. Lin was a man who didn't speak much but attached great importance to friendship. When they were in the army together, Mr. Lin had even taken a bullet for his father, which left him crippled to this day. Their family definitely owed a lot to Mr. Lin.

After a moment, Nie Yan recalled that Mr. Lin had lent one hundred and sixty thousand dollars to his father, which took a heavy toll on his finances.

Nie Yan found it hard to imagine what sort of promise his father made to convince his relatives and friends to loan him so much money. If he didn't know any better, he would assume these people had gambling problems. Truthfully speaking, if his father succeeded, they would earn a huge sum of money, but if his father failed, they would receive nothing in return.

Mr. Lin averted his gaze when Nie Yan's eyes fell on him. Then, he stared back at Nie Yan with a slightly apologetic look and said, "Little Yan, I was dragged over here."

Nie Yan was also quick to catch on. After lending a hundred and sixty thousand dollars to his father, Mr. Lin probably wasn't doing too well financially. In all likelihood, Mr. Lin only came because he was unable to resist the pressure from First Uncle and the other relatives. In his heart, Nie Yan didn't blame him either.

First Uncle and the rest sighed a breath of relief when Nie Yan answered the door.

Nie Yan wore an expression of ridicule on his face. He gazed at his several relatives, smiling and said, “Uncles, aunties, you didn’t think that I had run off, right?”

“Well, who knows!? Your parents borrowed so much money from us! If by any chance you ran off, then who would we go to!?” uttered First Uncle’s wife in an unkind tone. Her grating, high-pitched voice was already somewhat painful to listen to, but at the moment, it became even more unbearable.

Every one of his relatives forced themselves into his house.

“If I wanted to run, I would have done so a long time ago,” Nie Yan sneered.

“Brat! How dare you speak to us in such a tone! Stop wasting our time and call your parents up!” Leveraging his seniority, First Uncle Luoming spoke with unrestrained arrogance.

“My parents are currently busy and can’t be bothered to speak to you lot. If there’s nothing else, I suggest you go home.” Nie Yan then turned to Mr. Lin and said, “Uncle Lin, I’ll do my best to pay back the money my family owes you as soon as possible. I know your family is in a difficult place right now. I’m so sorry we’re causing you and your family so much trouble.”

Uncle Lin shook his head in response. Waving his hands, he said, “Don’t worry about it. Although we aren’t in the best of circumstances, we’re not in the worst either. Granted, even if I

don't have any money, I can still beg Old Liu to lend me some. Your father and I are friends who would die for each other. Even if your father can't pay back the money, I wouldn't hound his son over it."

Nie Yan was quite touched by Mr. Liu's sincere words. Sometimes the saying, "Blood is thicker than water," simply wasn't true.

The discrepancy between Mr. Lin and his relatives was like black and white!

"The money my family owes will be repaid in full. My parents have been gone for how long now? Yet you all act like they stole your money and ran away," Nie Yan criticized as he coldly eyed his relatives.

"When did you become such a presumptuous brat? Make a phone call to your parents right now!" First Uncle's palm came flying towards Nie Yan's face. His first uncle had an incredibly short temper and would always beat and scold him at the first sign of perceived disrespect. Nie Yan was very afraid of him when he was younger, but at present, he didn't fear his first uncle in the slightest.

Nie Yan reached out and grabbed his first uncle's arm, stopping the attempted slap midway. He shot a cold glance at his first uncle and growled, "I already told you. My parents are too busy to bother with you lot. You aren't welcome here, so I suggest you get out."

“Brat! Who allowed you to speak?!” First Uncle still wanted to rely on his seniority to beat and scold Nie Yan, but when he tried pulling back his arm, he discovered his nephew’s hand was like an iron claw, firmly clasping it in place. No matter how he struggled, he was unable to break free, leaving his heart dumbfounded. Just when did his nephew grow to be so strong?

Only then did he notice that his nephew was taller and more robust than he remembered. Nie Yan was almost five foot nine and was no longer the frail and thin child he knew from the past.

He soon noticed Nie Yan’s grip becoming stronger and stronger, causing him to start sweating from the pain which in turn made his face turn bright red, but he was unwilling to back down to a child.

“Husband, what’s wrong? Nie Yan, let go of him! He’s your first uncle, you impudent brat!” First Uncle’s Wife scolded in a high-pitched shriek after realizing her husband was being overpowered.

“How much interest did my parents promise you?” Nie Yan asked, paying no attention to his aunt’s words. He swept his gaze over the three relatives in front of him before releasing his first uncle’s arm.

Having finally regained control of his arm, Uncle Luoming sighed in relief as he rubbed his arm.

“Ten percent a month!” First Uncle’s Wife replied. She looked like she had been injected with chicken blood as her expression

was so distorted even her face looked like it was twisted.

Ten percent a month... In other words, his family had to pay back ten percent interest every month. Not to mention, it was compound interest, which meant they had to pay back more on top of what they already owed in the previous months. His relatives were basically no different from loan sharks.

When he brought up this matter, each and every one of his relatives revealed rotten expressions.

“Old Liu and I told your father he didn’t need to pay any interest...” Mr. Lin explained to Nie Yan. His gaze then happened to fall onto Luoming’s arm where he saw something unbelievable. The area Nie Yan grabbed had bruised and turned a deep shade of purple! Though it wasn’t much, he did know a fair bit about Luoming’s strength. He wasn’t some martial artist, but he still exercised regularly, and he was considerably strong for the average person. Yet Nie Yan, who was no more than a child, had taken full control over Luoming, rendering him helpless. The power required for such a feat was unimaginable!

“Uncle Lin, the money will be returned to you soon, rest assured. As for aunties and uncles, you’ll get your money back and not a penny less. Even if my parents cannot pay it back, I’ll do it in their stead.” Nie Yan stared at his several snobbish relatives, his tone turning increasingly cold.

He wouldn’t allow his father to end up the same way as his past life, neither would he allow his relatives to get their grubby hands on his father’s business. He would force upon these relatives a life

of eternal remorse. Taking away all their possible means, he would leave them destitute with no hope of ever escaping the abyss he would leave them in. Only by taking care of them in such a manner would these people have no chance of nipping back at his father's heels.

Nie Yan would exact revenge on the sins they committed and make them suffer as he had. His heart had grown much colder in the final years of his past life.

Notes:

[1\]](#) In the raws, Nie Yan addresses them individually. Da Jiu (Maternal Uncle), Jiu Ma (Maternal Uncle's Wife), Gu Ma (Paternal Aunt), and Er Yi (Mother's Second Sister). Mr. Lin was addressed as Uncle Lin, but it was changed for the sake of preventing confusion since he isn't a relative.

Chapter 106 – Nie Yan's Talent

“You rotten punk! Your parents owe so much money. Even if we sold you off, do you really think you'd somehow pay it back?” Uncle Luo Ming's wife sneered.

Unlike his wife, however, Uncle Luo Ming's prior arrogance had vanished almost entirely. He couldn't help but notice that the atmosphere around his nephew was completely different from the past. He no longer dared to treat Nie Yan like a child he could easily push around.

“Little Yan, have you been training recently? Come, let your Uncle Lin see how much you've grown!” This recent development made Mr. Lin feel happy and rekindled his desire for a good fight. Seeing his old comrade's son finally grow up was also one of the things he desired to witness in his life.

Mr. Lin pushed past Luo Ming and Nie Yan's other relatives. Although the space in the house was a little narrow, it was still more than sufficient for sparring. In fact, a narrow space would actually better reflect the abilities of both fighters.

Uncle Luo Ming and the others all stared at Mr. Lin with bewildered looks on their faces. Just what in the world was Lin Ya planning to do?

“Yes!” Nie Yan nodded his head. He felt great respect towards Mr. Lin, but even more so a deep sense of shame. In his past life, due to their relation with the Nie Household, Mr. Lin and his

family were targeted and fell into poverty.

Mr. Lin suddenly threw a fist at Nie Yan.

Nie Yan put up a horizontal guard with his left arm and retaliated with a strong sidekick. His leg produced a faint whistling as it flew towards Mr. Lin's chest.

"Nice kick!" Mr. Lin said, pleasantly surprised. He leaned to the side, dodging the kick, and then closed in with an elbow strike.

Nie Yan hastily got out of the way and returned with a powerful roundhouse kick.

Mr. Lin raised his arm to block.「Bang!」The strength of the kick forced him several steps back, regaining his balance only after supporting himself on a nearby desk. The great force that he had just been inflicted with shocked him, but the joy he felt at experiencing Nie Yan's growth firsthand greatly surpassed his alarm. He heartily laughed and said, "Not bad! Come, let's go again!"

They had several more exchanges, but the outcome of the battle still could not be determined. Luo Ming and the other relatives were filled with astonishment as the spectacular scene unfolded before their eyes. Lin Ya was an army veteran, and his ability in martial arts wasn't anything to scoff at. Even six grown men normally wouldn't be his match, yet Nie Yan had managed to last this long against him. Not to mention he was able to fight on par with Lin Ya the entire time. The fact that he could manage such a

feat was simply just too inconceivable.

「Bang!」Nie Yan and Mr. Lin both retreated several steps.

“Little Yan, you’ve been learning martial arts, right? Not bad... Uncle Lin is already old, so I can’t compare with you youngsters,” Mr. Lin praised without restraint. He was happy for his old comrade. With Nie Yan’s ability, as long as his academics weren’t too bad, getting into the number one military academy wouldn’t be a problem. They might even take the initiative to recruit him!

“I’ve only learned a little. Uncle Lin, you might be old, but you haven’t grown weak at all.”

“Being too modest isn’t good either. So, have you thought about what you want to do for university...?” Mr. Lin nervously asked.

“No, I haven’t,” Nie Yan shook his head and replied. He still hadn’t considered this matter. After all, that was still over a year away.

“Apply for the number one military academy then. I have an old army buddy working as a combat instructor there. I can ask him to put in a word for you. Besides, your talent is an additional reassurance. Your academics shouldn’t be a problem either. Back then, your father had barely failed to get in, and it became one of the biggest regrets in his life, but you’ll surely pass. Next year in January, the academy is hosting exams for special enrollment students. You must definitely apply then!” Uncle Lin exclaimed.

“En,” Nie Yan solemnly nodded. In his past life, he wasn’t able to pass the exam for the military academy. His father had been disappointed in him for a long time because of this matter. In addition, the moment his father received the results of that exam, he seemed to have aged several years. In this life, Nie Yan would definitely succeed his father’s dream.

Hearing the words, “number one military academy,” Luo Ming snapped back to reality. His nephew’s recent show of ability frightened him. Nie Yan was actually able to beat an army veteran who’d been through several wars. Two years ago, Old Liu’s son had passed the entrance exam for the academy. Yet every year he came back, he’d still be put in his place by Lin Ya. Taking this into consideration, Nie Yan entering the military academy shouldn’t be a problem.

Just what kind of place was the number one military academy? It was the nation’s top university specialized in nurturing talented individuals! So long as one passed the entrance exam, they would receive a scholarship which granted them a minimum of sixty thousand dollars each year. In addition, once they enrolled, they would at least receive the rank of a company officer. Every person’s performance in exams directly correlated to their military ranks. Some people, after graduating the academy, would be regiment officers or higher.

As the proverb goes, “Citizens should not oppose officials.” If Nie Yan really was able to succeed and graduate from the military academy, who knows if he might hold resentment in his heart over today’s matters.

Luo Ming and the others felt their scalps go numb when they saw Nie Yan's ice-cold expression.

“Luo Ming. I'm thinking if Little Yan pass the entrance exams for the military academy, paying back those loans won't be a problem, correct...?” Lin Ya said to Luo Ming. If they continued to hound Nie Yan and affected his frame of mind and studies, Lin Ya was thinking it might be necessary that he teach these people a lesson.

“This shouldn't be a problem, right...?” Lin Ya said in a menacing tone, causing Luo Ming to shrink back.

Nie Yan's other relatives also no longer dared to speak so harshly to him anymore.

“Little Yan, try your best. If you enter the military academy, auntie will be happy and proud,” Nie Yan's paternal aunt said with an embarrassed yet obviously fake smile.

“Yes! Little Yan, do try your best! We'll be taking our leave first, then.”

Nie Yan didn't reply but simply stared at them with frosty eyes. Only now, after hearing that he could potentially enter the academy, did these four snobbish lowlives begin putting on friendly airs in front of him. However, there was still a zero percent chance that he would forgive them.

Having said so, Nie Yan's relatives awkwardly left the house one after another. Lin Ya on the other hand stayed a while longer to chat with Nie Yan to give him some words of encouragement.

"Little Yan, do your best! You must succeed in entering the academy. If there's anything troubling you, just tell your Uncle Lin. So long as you get into the academy, all your problems will vanish without a trace. If you do, you'll turn your parent's lives around as well. Work hard! Uncle Lin will be taking his leave now," Lin Ya said.

"En! Thanks, Uncle Lin," Nie Yan nodded. What Lin Ya didn't know was that his family's prospects would turn around before he even graduated high school. Once his parents returned, their financial circumstances would take a significant turn for the better.

After Lin Ya left, Nie Yan didn't leave the house for the whole day. Instead, he stayed at home, studying hard and relearning everything that he had forgotten. After coming back to the past, he wasn't willing to live his through his days muddleheaded. He would work hard to take full control of his fate. After seeing his relatives' reactions today, it only further solidified his belief that only by becoming strong would those petty, despicable people fear him and stay far away. Otherwise, he would be harassed by them to no end.

The next day, Nie Yan logged on and made his usual runs of emptying the marketplace of all Black Phenol, Black Phenol Recipes, and the other various materials. After finishing his business, he went to kill the field bosses that had respawned, Gato

the Lion King and the Ogre Devourer. By repeating what he did the previous day, he was able to kill them effortlessly, but those two weaklings were stingy and only dropped three pieces of Gold-grade equipment and one Fortune Gem. Thankfully, one of them happened to be a set item he wanted—Blackblood Gloves: Resilience +7, Dexterity +12.

The other two pieces of equipment were for a Priest and a Paladin, though Nie Yan didn't plan to sell them since he wasn't lacking in money. In the future, he would have a steady flow of income arriving in his pockets. He would rather let them rot in his storage than put them on the marketplace lest they enter an enemy's hands. On the other hand, if an acquaintance wanted to purchase them, then he would think it over.

Not long after logging in, an announcement entered his ears: Sosil Valley had opened!

This incredibly exciting news caused countless guilds to rush over so they could get a headstart in the new dungeon.

Chapter 107 – Black Phenol Frenzy

The first team to succeed in clearing a new dungeon would receive additional rewards and Honour. Not to mention, since Sosil Valley was the final Level 3 dungeon, the equipment dropped there would be the best. These benefits spurred numerous guild leaders into attempting Sosil Valley with their elite members. Though the price of pioneering was wrought with bitterness and difficulty, some teams still advanced dauntlessly. Yet, in the end, the overwhelming majority would fail to even reach the boss, falling victim to the extremely potent poison of the common mobs.

A hallucinogenic poison that applied the fear status debuff and robbed the player of all movement ability... Presently, the only cure for it was Black Phenol!

Shortly after Sosil Valley's opening, the demand for Black Phenol magnified countless times over. All of a sudden, it became the hottest selling item in the marketplace.

Sosil Valley was situated inside of a wide, open prairie. Today, the normally tranquil fields were bustling with activity as various teams from notable guilds dotted the entire region.

Among the teams gathered in the prairie, a group of Azure Falling Sky members were discussing a certain matter regarding the quantity of Black Phenol in the marketplace.

“This is really odd... Logically speaking, since we were one of the very first guilds to enter the dungeon, you'd think we'd be one of

the first groups to snag all the Black Phenol in the marketplace, but when our members in the city arrived at the auction house... all of the Black Phenol suddenly vanished, and we were only able to purchase three bottles.”

“Just which guild was able to move faster than us...?”

“Captain Clear Sky, we’ve already ordered our Alchemists to put down what they’re doing and concentrate on producing Black Phenol.”

The person these guild members addressed as Clear Sky was a Paladin with the appearance of a man in his mid-twenties. His tall stature, standing at almost six foot three, was clad in unadorned ash-gray armour. The solemn expression on his face and imposing pressure he emanated left the other members feeling stifled and tense.

As the star player of Azure Falling Sky, one of the nation’s top ten gaming organizations, Clear Sky’s name was well-known to the gamers of China.

“How long will our supply of Black Phenol last us for?” Clear Sky asked. Someone was a step ahead of them and purchased all of the Black Phenol in the auction house. Thus, he could only look towards other methods.

“If we use them sparingly, we can still do another run of the dungeon.”

“How many of our Alchemists have learned how to concoct Black Phenol?”

“Only one...” the guild member embarrassedly replied.

Clear Sky’s expression became even more gloomy. If their supply of Black Phenol couldn’t keep up, then some other guild would get the first clear for Sosil Valley, which meant their rankings might fall by several places again. For a large gaming organization like them, falling one or two spots meant significant financial losses.

However, this type of development wasn’t only happening to them. In fact, aside from Azure Falling Sky... Victorious Return, Holy Empire, Brilliant Mother Earth, Atlantis, and almost all the other large guilds were in similar dilemmas. The market was entirely devoid of Black Phenol, and their own Alchemists couldn’t produce enough to keep up with the guild’s needs.

The guilds preparing to enter Sosil Valley numbered over sixty—
—and the same problem was perplexing all of them!

“Captain Sleepy Fox, what are we going to do? Without any Black Phenol, we won’t be able to run Sosil Valley! We’ll end up falling behind the other guilds. I heard someone found a piece of Gold equipment for Warriors in a recent run,” Dusk said in a gloomy tone. He felt their situation was the most tragic. There wasn’t a single Alchemist in the entire guild who could concoct Black Phenol, nor did they have any in the guild’s treasury.

“Give me the list of drops for Sosil Valley,” Sleepy Fox ordered, his tone somewhat jittery.

“Warrior’s Primal Wind and Tenacious Metal sets, Elementalist’s Scorching Flame Burst set, and a bunch of non-set equipment.” Dusk handed over the list to Sleepy Fox, but then, Nie Yan popped in his mind, and he quickly added, “This is only the list for Easy. No one knows what Specialist drops yet.”

“Tenacious Metal set... No, this won’t do. We must obtain that set!” As for the Black Phenol, first try and find an Alchemist who knows how to concoct it. If that won’t do, just contact the other guilds and offer to buy some for a high price! Where do Black Phenol Recipes and the required materials to concoct them drop?” Sleepy Fox scanned over the other team members.

“Celadon Tides Valley, but the drop rates are pretty terrible. We can go there, but we won’t obtain much.”

“Silent Gulf and Black Charred Islands also have them.”

“Are there any other areas?” Sleepy Fox asked.

“Not that we know of.”

“Tell some of our members to head over to those areas to farm. I refuse to believe this shortage will hold us back!”

“The other guilds have probably thought up something similar.

They'll be sending their forces to those areas as well. We won't be able to obtain very much if we're forced to share with too many players."

"Sigh... Doesn't matter. We'll just have to take what we can get," Sleepy Fox replied.

As predicted, various guilds shifted their manpower to gathering Black Phenol Recipes and the materials required for concocting it. Many teams soon departed the prairies in droves, and the bustling fields once more returned to their previous tranquil state.

Recently, Calore became even more lively, bustling with noise and activity. Many players were advertising on the streets: "Purchasing Black Penol! Twenty-five copper per bottle, ten silver for a recipe!"

These prices had already surpassed the ones in his past life by more than ten times over.

Due to Nie Yan regularly cleaning the auction house out of all Black Phenol and related items for the past several days, the shortage in supply had grown even wider. As a result, the spike in prices rose even more sharply in this timeline. Even though others were offering generous amounts to purchase these items, very few players were willing to part with them

Yet the buying frenzy was just beginning. Players possessing large quantities of Black Phenol quickly caught on and began hoarding their stock, waiting for the prices to swell even more.

Thus, the already depleted supply of Black Phenol only dwindled further.

After checking the market price, Nie Yan knew it would inflate even more. Right now it was a seller's market, a state of affairs that would last for at least ten more days, so he was perfectly willing to bide his time. After all, he had complete control of the market.

Nie Yan checked his bag. With the Unknown Transfer Scroll, he would be able to retrieve another chapter from the Book of Order. However, before he planned to set off, a certain matter popped in his mind. Before he headed for the second chapter, he would need to complete this task first.

This matter was similarly dangerous, but the reward was simply too enticing.

Nie Yan headed to the NPC shop and purchased a large quantity of consumables. Then, he proceeded to the auction house to resupply on high-quality crossbow bolts, as well as purchasing a great deal of Silk Cloth, which he crafted into Combat Bandages. Furthermore, he bought some black garbs which had the property of hiding his appearance.

Nie Yan's destination was a Level 10 zone, so the Flash Powder, Web Scrolls, and Sheep Transformation scrolls wouldn't be of any use, but he kept some in his bag anyways just in case.

Once he finished his preparations, he headed for the transfer area.

Along the way there, he came across countless players looking to purchase Black Phenol, which only further confirmed his speculations. The various guilds were extremely desperate. It seemed his choice of investing into this market early on was clearly a correct one.

Nie Yan suddenly had a thought. Holy Empire should be feeling immense pressure in trying to secure a supply of Black Phenol. If he called up Sleepy Fox and lent him a hand right now... Knowing his personality, if anything were to occur in the future, Sleepy Fox would certainly make sure to repay the favour.

Selling a portion of his supply to Holy Empire would be immensely beneficial for both sides. Not only would he obtain short term benefits, but when the other guilds see Holy Empire reaping rewards from exploring the dungeon, they would undoubtedly turn green with envy, serving only to inflate the price of Black Phenol to even more ludicrous levels. In short, Nie Yan would be able to earn a large profit, make Sleepy Fox owe him a favour, and raise the price of Black Phenol simultaneously. This was killing three birds with one stone!

Chapter 108 – Plague Canyon Tasoyi Village

「How's it going? Are your runs going smoothly?」

「Sigh... Please don't remind me. We wiped on the first run. Dealing with the Werewolves' poison is just too difficult without Black Phenol. We barely made any progress... That aside, the equipment drops are pretty decent. Not only does the boss have a chance to drop Dark Gold equipment, even the common mobs have a chance of dropping Gold equipment. Why? Are you interested in joining?」Sleepy Fox didn't miss a beat and made use of this opportunity to try and recruit Nie Yan.

「Nah, not really, but I do happen to have some Black Phenol on me. I'm wondering if you're interested?」

「Black Phenol? How much do you have?」 Sleepy Fox asked. He couldn't help but get excited. Was Nie Yan unaware of just how many players were madly scouring for Black Phenol right now?

「Thirty bottles, one recipe, and sixty raw materials. Give me an offer,」Nie Yan replied.

「S-so much?」Sleepy Fox sucked in a breath of cold air. He thought Nie Yan would have ten bottles to offer at most, but thirty? It would be more than enough for them to not have to worry about their supply of Black Phenol, even if only for a short while.

「Hmm? Too much for you?」

「N-no! Definitely not too much!」 Sleepy Fox hastily replied. He felt he'd really be shooting himself in the foot if he allowed Nie Yan to sell these items to someone else.「Brother Nie... I, Sleepy Fox, will definitely remember this favour. If anything comes up in the future, don't hesitate to let me know!」

To Sleepy Fox, it was almost inconceivable how Nie Yan had managed to get his hands on so many, especially when there was such fierce competition over a low supply. Just what wasn't this person capable of?

「Then let's get straight to the point. What's your offer?」Nie Yan said.

「Thirty silver,」Sleepy Fox answered, his tone slightly embarrassed. Although his offer was already a little higher than the current market price, who knew just how high the prices would rise over the course of the next few days? Though, in truth, thirty silvers was his absolute limit. The daily costs of maintaining a guild weren't cheap. Thus, he couldn't afford to spend too much money. Holy Empire might be a large guild, but it didn't have much in the way of expendable income.

「Hmm... how about this? I need a few items, but [I'm too lazy](#) to go looking for them myself. How about you have some of your subordinates collect them for me? I'm looking for the skill books for two active skills, Backstab and Eviscerate, and five passive skills, Power of the Barbarian, Primal Strength, Strength Amplification, Strength of the Restless, and Power of the Warlock. If you find these for me, you won't need to pay money for the Black

Phenol.」The value of these skills books roughly covered the costs of the Black Phenol along with its recipe and materials. As for how much exactly, he couldn't be bothered to calculate.

「The first two should be simple, but why do you need so many Strength boosting skill books?」Sleepy Fox asked in bewilderment.

「Sorry, [that's a secret](#).」

「Alright... It's going to be a little difficult, but it's doable. After all, they're still relatively common skill books,」Sleepy Fox said. The passive skills Nie Yan was looking for were decent—capable of permanently increasing one's strength as long as they were equipped. However, they couldn't be improved, took up a skill slot, and were quite expensive, so few players found them worthwhile.

「That's fine, so I guess it's a deal then. I'll mail you the items.」

「Alright, I'll send over thirty silver first as collateral. You can return the money to me when I collect the skill books,」Sleepy Fox said after thinking for a moment.

「That's fine too,」Nie Yan replied. He placed the items into the mailbox beside the transfer point and wrote Sleepy Fox as the recipient.

「System: Blade Dancer has deposited 30 silver into your storage.」

「I've sent the money over,」Sleepy Fox said.

「Yeah, I just received it. I'm a little busy, so let's talk some other time.」

Shortly after hanging up the call, Nie Yan put on the black garbs, concealing his entire appearance, and then stepped into the transfer point.

「System: Confirm your destination. Transfer to Plague Canyon, Tasoyi village? Cost: 2 silver 」

Yes!

Since the location of the town was so remote, the transfer fee ended up being a total of two silver.

The scenery shifted and, by the time Nie Yan opened his eyes, he was no longer surrounded by the towering walls of Calore, but rather, a plethora of dense thickets and plant life. However, this place was more than just forest, it was actually a town. Numerous houses had been built into the trunks of trees in the area, many of them looking weathered and shabby, the result of enduring the elements for countless decades.

After stepping out of the transfer point, a man in worn, ash-gray robes who was carrying an archaic staff brushed past Nie Yan. He could be best described as haggard and approaching old age. From the indistinct patterns inscribed into his robes, Nie Yan could tell this aged fellow was an NPC Arcane Mage.

The old man shot Nie Yan an unfriendly glance and began radiating a strange arcane aura. Nie Yan hastily bowed his head and made his way forward.

Tasoyi was an odd little village. Translated from the Ancient Common language, its name meant unfriendly sins. According to the legend surrounding the village, God condemned the residents of the town to eternal sickness by spreading a plague. Moreover, the NPCs here were not only unwelcoming to strangers, but were also notorious for being incredibly difficult to interact with. It was to the point where even a single word greeting from a player to an NPC would incite such an outrage in the village that the player would be lucky to get off with just being expelled, lest they be attacked

Though he looked so unremarkable and frail that even a gentle breeze could knock him over, this old man was really a Level 30 Elite NPC. In fact, no resident of this town was below Level 30.

Therefore, from Nie Yan's perspective as a mere Level 7, this town was an extremely dangerous place.

Nie Yan knew it was imperative that he protect himself in such a perilous location.

As he walked through the village, Nie Yan encountered various NPCs with unique appearances. He kept his head low, appearance hidden behind black garbs, and hurriedly walked past them. When he arrived at the village entrance, he raised his head to look at a

quaint cabin built atop a nearby tree.

In his past life, many players liked shopping at that place since it sold many useful goods. However, with his current financial capital, Nie Yan still lacked the qualifications to frequent this location.

Without uttering a word, Nie Yan silently exited the village. He followed along the winding and twisting path and headed into depths of the forest.

「System: You've discovered Plague Forest.」

Dull, decaying trees dotted Plague Forest. Here, neither greenery nor life could be seen in the dreary forest. The oppressive atmosphere here, combined with the dense plant growth, would easily leave players claustrophobic.

The inhabitants of this forest were all extremely dangerous, each and every one of them exceeding Level 30. To Nie Yan, at his current level, they were unparalleled existences.

Nie Yan stealthily advanced through the forest. The trees here hid the sky and covered the earth. Few rays of light pierced through the gaps between the forest canopy, and the ones that did only left behind mottled reflections on the forest floor.

The lighting was dim, and the stale atmosphere was stifling.

Upon arriving in this forest, Nie Yan's mind became extremely focused. When he heard the slightest of rustles, he raised his head and looked at an area between two trees off in the distance.

Spread across several large trees was a giant spiderweb. There, a giant blood-red spider was sprawled on top of it, quietly lying in ambush while awaiting its next meal.

That was the Level 30 Leader-class monster, Tempered Blood Spider!

Even the faintest sounds would alert these highly sensitive spiders to the presence of nearby prey. Nie Yan quietly departed the area and ducked into the maze of trees.

After several more detours around other dangerous monsters, Nie Yan eventually came across an area littered with towering stacks of stone and boulders, almost as if it was a forest itself. Under the erosion of wind and rain, these stones had become extremely smooth and round.

It's over there... Nie Yan became even more cautious as he neared his destination. He passed through the dense underbrush, neared one of the stone stacks, and then hid behind it for cover.

Chapter 109 – Gaia Monitor

The sound of heavy, turbid breathing travelled between the scattered stacks and entered Nie Yan's ears. As he carefully went over to investigate, an enormous, scaly body, lying flat on the ground, entered his sight.

It was a Gaia Monitor!

Nie Yan knew he would be encountering this fellow even before arriving at this location.

This five-meter long lizard hidden between the piles of rocks was covered in sharp spikes, making it almost indistinguishable from an ancient dinosaur.

As he looked elsewhere, he spotted a small cave well-hidden among some boulders. If one didn't observe carefully, it would be rather easy to overlook.

From where he stood, he was unable to see deeper inside the cave.

I'll need to get past this lizard first... Entering the cave without alerting the Gaia Monitor wasn't going to be a simple task.

By habit, Nie Yan inspected the Gaia Monitor with Transcendent Insight.

Gaia Monitor (Elite): Level ??

Although Transcendent Insight failed to gather anything significant due to the level discrepancy, Nie Yan dimly recalled the Gaia Monitor was an Elite monster that was at least level 30. Even the slightest graze from such a high-level monster would undoubtedly mean his death.

Fortunately, this Gaia Monitor wouldn't stay in this area for too long.

That being the case, Nie Yan patiently waited...

After twenty minutes, the Gaia Monitor finally began to move. It lazily rose to its feet, then stumbled over to a nearby boulder. As it perched itself at the top, its massive tail smashed into another boulder which happened to be quite close to where Nie Yan was hiding.「Boom!」A large explosion echoed out as the boulder instantly turned to rubble, sending debris flying in every direction.

「Pa! Pa! Pa!」Unfortunately, several of the fragments struck Nie Yan as well.

-23, -27. -26

Yet he didn't dare to budge an inch lest the Gaia Monitor discover his presence.

The Gaia Monitor lowered its head and scanned over the mess of

rocks and boulders.

Nie Yan felt his heart skip a beat. He remained motionless as he hid behind the cover of the rock pile, praying the Gaia Monitor wouldn't notice his presence.

Only after what seemed like an eternity did the Gaia Monitor, having not found anything strange, languidly crawl off toward another area.

Once it had moved far enough away, Nie Yan at long last breathed a sigh of relief. Good... it didn't notice me. At the sight of its silhouette disappearing into the distance, he finally dared to venture out and head for the cave.

After arriving at the cave's entrance, Nie Yan felt a cold wind blowing from deep within the cave's cavity. As he went inside, he noticed a slight dampness in the air as well as the walls that were full of deep scratches, presumably left behind by the Gaia Monitor.

This cave was its nest. Every two hours it would leave the area to sunbathe near some distant cliffs for five minutes or so.

With Nie Yan's current gear and level, even if the Gaia Monitor laid motionless and allowed him to shoot at it with reckless abandon, the damage he dealt would be entirely negated by its base regeneration.

Were it not for the fact that Nie Yan knew the Gaia Monitor

would leave its nest for some time, he would have never dared to come to this place.

As Nie Yan gradually explored deeper, the surroundings became increasingly dim until light no longer shined inside the cave. It was pitch black. He wasn't even able to see his own hands. Thus, he could only rely on his other senses to guide him through his search.

Fortunately, aside from the Gaia Monitor, no other monsters inhabited this cave.

Nie Yan's time was limited. If the Gaia Monitor caught wind of an unknown scent after returning, it would immediately rush inside the cave to tear the intruder into shreds.

After three minutes of exploring, Nie Yan still hadn't reached the end, though he discovered a faint glow being emitted from deeper within the cave.

Is that a chest...? Nie Yan couldn't help but get excited and hastily head towards the source of the glow.

When Nie Yan explored this area in his past life, this chest had long been opened by another player, so he had been unaware of its existence until now. In this life, however, since he was the first player to arrive in this cave, he also became the first to discover this chest. This was quite the pleasant surprise!

As expected, shortly after Nie Yan arrived at the corner of the cave, he found a shimmering silver treasure chest. Full of anticipation, he quickly examined it, and to his relief it wasn't locked. If it had been a Level 30 locked chest, he would have no hope whatsoever of opening it.

Treasure chests were divided into two categories, normal chests and locked chests. Any player, regardless of profession or level, could open and retrieve the contents of the former. The latter, however, required a skill or key of the corresponding level.

Nie Yan squatted and started opening the chest.

「System: Opening treasure chest... Estimated Completion: 10%... 30%...」

「Click!」The chest was opened. Nie Yan put his hand inside the chest and felt around until he found something, whereupon he took out two items before hastily examining the first one.

Dark Pendant (Silver)

Requirements: 20 Strength, 30 Dexterity

Properties: Strength +7, Night Vision +3

Weight: 0.1 lb

Restrictions: None

Nie Yan's heartbeat sped up a little as he stared at the pendant. It

turned out to be an accessory that increased night vision. Not only that, but he was even able to wear it right away! Thanks to his gear being good, he had long met the pendant's Strength and Dexterity requirements.

The moment he equipped the pendant, Nie Yan's range of vision increased significantly, so much so that he could even vaguely make out the walls of the cave, but even then, it was still extremely limited. At this stage of the game though, it could already be considered quite good.

Nie Yan then inspected the second item.

Thunderbolt Blaze (Intermediate Scroll)

Requirements: 30 Intelligence, set of incantation gestures, set of invocation syllables

Description: Deals 200 damage in a 20-meter radius every second for fifteen seconds

Restrictions: Human; Thief, Paladin, Warrior

The second item was a rare intermediate scroll, which was fairly expensive even when the average level of the playerbase was around thirty to forty. Their drop rates were abysmal, not to mention they were one-use only. As such, they came to be categorized as too-good-to-use among the ordinary players. For Nie Yan to find this scroll now was tantamount to finding a priceless treasure. Its usefulness even exceeded the Dark Pendant's.

The requirement for activating the scroll could be met by switching to gear that increased Intelligence. Then, he could simply switch back to his old gear when he finished using the scroll.

Done with inspecting his newly acquired loot, Nie Yan stored the Thunderbolt Blaze Scroll in his bag then proceeded deeper into the cave.

After walking for several minutes, Nie Yan found another treasure chest, a golden one at that! Unfortunately, the celebrations ended there because it was locked...

A Level 30 gold treasure chest required at least the Intermediate Lockpicking skill to open. So for the time being, Nie Yan had no way of opening it.

Truthfully speaking, Nie Yan was already able to learn Lockpicking when he reached Level 5, but he had not because of the skill's high demand amongst the playerbase. Even after visiting the auction house several times, he had still been unable to find the skill book for sale, and although it could be farmed, the drop rate was one in ten thousand. Wasting several days for a single skill book just wasn't worth the effort, so he had no choice but to put off learning Lockpicking for another time.

Nie Yan felt a deep sense of regret as he unwillingly departed the area. After travelling a little further in, he suddenly felt vibrations in the ground. Shit, this isn't good. The Gaia Monitor is back!

The sound of heavy, lumbering footsteps soon followed, echoing along the cave walls before entering Nie Yan's ears.

Knowing he couldn't dally any longer, Nie Yan relied on his limited vision and madly sprinted towards the depths of the cave.

After half a minute, he saw traces of light as the howling of wind blew into the cave. He had finally found the exit!

Nie Yan sped up his pace and soon arrived at the end of the cave where he halted his footsteps. Just ahead was an overhanging precipice. Now standing at the edge, strong winds howled as they blew past his face. The drop down was in excess of several hundred meters.

This mountain looked as if it had been split down the middle with another cliff face straight across from him while a valley lay beneath him at bottom of the rift. As he gazed down, he could see the lush forest growing below.

Nie Yan quickly gauged how far he was from the opposite cliff face. Where the gap was the widest, he would have to cover over a hundred meters to get to the other side. In the narrow regions, however, he would only need to cover a roughly fifty-meter distance.

Fortunately, where he stood now happened to be the closest to the opposite cliff wall.

The only reason he came to this location was for the sake of reaching that cliff wall before him. With his present abilities, if he wanted to reach there, the only method available to him was this!

Nie Yan carefully scanned the opposite cliff wall but didn't find anything strange.

The vibrations he felt from the Gaia Monitor were progressively becoming stronger, which meant he didn't have much more time. He needed to act before it arrived.

There's no point in hesitating any longer. Making it to the other side shouldn't be a problem anyway... Nie Yan thought. He prepared to make a running leap and backed up approximately ten meters. Before making the jump, he familiarized himself with the surroundings to ensure that he wouldn't trip.

Though he didn't have long since a large silhouette was rapidly approaching from behind.

Nie Yan activated a Haste Scroll before breaking into a sprint. He gained more and more momentum as he neared the cliff.

By this time, the Gaia Monitor had finally arrived at the cave exit and lunged forward in pursuit. Even within the confines of the narrow cave tunnel, it was still rather fast. Its roar was akin to claps of thunder as it rushed at the intruder from the rear.

Nie Yan had already reached his fastest speed, the distance

between him and the cliff quickly shortening. Five meters... Three meters... One meter... After arriving at the edge of the cliff, he leapt forward and shot into the air like an artillery shell as he flew towards the opposite side.

The strong winds howled past his ears, blowing into his face, but strangely... Nie Yan sensed that something had followed from behind and jumped off the cliff alongside him. Presumably, it was the Gaia Monitor...

Nie Yan began rapidly descending as he flew toward the opposite cliff face.

If such motion were expressed in a mathematical model, it would be a graph of horizontal projectile motion with air resistance. Nie Yan would continuously near the opposite cliff in this motion until he crashed into the opposite cliff or fell to his death.

After falling about a hundred meters, Nie Yan was quite close to the cliff wall. Without a moment's hesitation, he activated the Featherfall Jewel's ability and gradually slowed his descent until he was floating just like a feather.

As he attempted to find a place to land, Nie Yan quickly scanned over the cliff and spotted a cluster of vines near a cave about ten meters away. Over there!

Nie Yan shot a web line from his Silk Spinner Ring at the cluster and firmly stuck to it.

Now suspended over the cliff wall, Nie Yan slowly pulled himself up. His right hand grasped onto the vines, and he was left half dangling in the air.

「System: You've discovered Raindel」

Nie Yan had arrived in Raindel, a towering mountain peak. High and steep rock walls surrounded him. As he looked up at the peak of the mountain, he recalled certain legends that said that Temple of Raindel was located above, though he had never went there himself.

After being used, the Silk Spinner Ring's ability went on cooldown.

Nie Yan estimated the distance between himself and the cave. It was roughly five meters away. He only needed to wait for the Silk Spinner Ring's ability to come off cooldown, then he would be able to get over there.

In his past life, when Nie Yan heard someone had arrived here using only the Silk Spinner Ring and Featherfall Jewel, he thought it was inconceivable. However, now, after experiencing it firsthand, it really wasn't all that far-fetched.

Twenty seconds later, the Silk Spinner Ring's ability finally came off cooldown.

Nie Yan shot out another web line, whereupon it stuck onto a

shrub near the cave's entrance. He pulled on it to make sure the line was secure, then grabbed hold and began climbing upward. Once one of his hands grabbed onto the ledge of the cave, he swung his leg upward and rolled inside.

After entering, Nie Yan discovered there was molten lava flowing within. Although the cave was small, it still contained its own little world. Numerous stalactites hung down from the cave's ceiling, forming a unique landscape.

Scorching hot gases bubbled from the depths of the mountain. According to the information from his past life, there was a Level 60 Elite Fire Elemental sleeping at its core. If Nie Yan were to enter the area, he would inevitably disturb it, though his goal for coming here was anything but that. After all, he had better things to do than throwing his life away.

Chapter 110 – Lively Market

Nie Yan carefully inspected his surroundings, making sure not to overlook even a single inch. His movements were extremely cautious. He didn't dare to make the slightest sound, for fear that he might alert the Fire Elemental sleeping in the depths.

Eventually, his search led him to a hidden cranny. There, past volcanic fumes and smoke that obscured his vision, he found a small shabby chest tucked tightly behind a boulder.

The chest was made of wooden plank. Through the passing of centuries, the wood had long decomposed and become riddled with holes. Yet the fact it hadn't broken down entirely in this harsh environment was the most surprising. It appeared rather ordinary, lacking the elegant designs of its silver and gold counterparts. The only feature worth paying particular attention to was the fire immunity rune engraved on the wood.

Although the ancient character appeared simple, it was exactly such an inconspicuous rune that isolated the chest from the fire elements in this cavern and ensured its integrity.

If my guess is correct... this should be it! Nie Yan knelt down and then opened the chest. He fished around for a while and eventually pulled out a ring.

Crawler Ring: Unidentified

The Crawler Ring! Alongside the Silk Spinner Ring, these two

rings were essential for any player who wanted to be considered top-tier!

Nie Yan used Transcendent Insight to appraise the Crawler Ring's properties.

Crawler Ring (Bronze): Unique Accessory

Requirements: Level 0

Properties: Enables the user to stick to walls and similar surfaces for ten minutes. (Cooldown: 1 hour)

Weight: 0.05 lb

Restrictions: Can be equipped by all factions.

The Crawler Ring, similar to the Silk Spinner Ring, was a unique accessory that aided the player in traversing difficult obstacles. Why had he risked life and death by passing through a Level 30 zone and sneaking into the Gaia Monitor's nest?

It was precisely for the sake of obtaining this ring!

Now that Nie Yan had both rings, there were no longer any obstacles that could hinder his path!

Filled with expectations, he equipped the Crawler Ring.

After obtaining the item he desired, he thought for a moment. He

could simply teleport out of here with a Return Scroll, but awakening the Fire Elemental wasn't a risk he was willing to take. The effects of the scroll's activation might alert the Fire Element of his presence.

As he retraced his steps, he was able to hear a rather rhythmic snoring coming from the depths of the cavern, sending forth a wave of hot air with every breath.

He quietly arrived back at the cavern's entrance. There, he activated the Crawler Ring's ability and immediately felt a strange suction force coming from his palms. Both hands stuck firmly to the surface of the rock as he began to descend the cliff.

If one were to spot him from afar, he would resemble a spider as he clung closely to the rock face. He was able to move quickly and easily as if he were treading on level ground.

For him, these steep, perilous cliffs were no longer a problem!

While searching for a suitable stopping point as he made his descent, he eventually came across a ledge he could stand on. There, he would be able to free up both his hands to use a Return Scroll.

Hmmm... The bottom seems like a Level 20-ish zone. There are quite a few Leader-class monsters there as well! Nie Yan stared at the monsters in the valley below, then glanced back at the Thunderbolt Blaze Scroll in his bag before having an inkling of an idea...

Considering his level and gear, it was too difficult, bordering on nigh impossible, for him to deal with even a single Level 20 monster, but that wasn't the case with the Thunderbolt Blaze Scroll!

As the rare intermediate scroll had the ability to kill monsters over Level 20!

Unfortunately, Nie Yan didn't possess sufficient Intelligence to cast the spell, but that could be easily remedied by finding a couple pieces of equipment in the marketplace! Thus, he set aside the thought for now and activated the Return Scroll. The scroll flashed, and a teleportation circle appeared beneath his feet.

Twenty seconds later, the circle pulsed with a brilliant light and he was teleported back to Calore.

After exiting the transfer area, he walked along Calore's main street. He saw players everywhere, advertising that they were purchasing Black Phenol for twenty-five copper a bottle, though it was evident no one was willing to sell. At present, the bottles of Black Phenol were like hot cakes. All the guilds were fighting for them, so who would be willing to sell to these middlemen?

Twenty-six copper!

Thirty copper!

Thirty-two copper!

Many guilds were trying to one-up their competition by offering even higher prices for Black Phenol. Though, in the end, players were still unwilling to sell, leaving these guilds wide-eyed and shocked.

Some guilds would simply station their members at the auction house for the day. Occasionally, Alchemists who could create Black Phenol would toss a few bottles up for auction, instantly spurring those guild members into a frenzy as they fought over it. The most a bottle had sold for in the auction house was fifty copper.

In this timeline, the Black Phenol shortage had arrived sooner, was much fiercer, and was even more terrifying. The overwhelming majority of the guilds were all temporarily at a loss as to how to cope with these circumstances.

With the prices of Black Phenol skyrocketing to such a degree, the profits these guilds were able to earn from running Sosil Valley was minimal. Despite this, it was necessary that they continue running the dungeon, since a list of all the equipment that could be obtained from Sosil Valley as well as their drop rates had already been released on Conviction's official website. Obtaining the Warrior equipment that dropped from the Werewolves was absolutely essential for the growth of their teams. The experience earned from killing the mobs was high as well. The only problem was that it was just too hard. There had already been several dozen attempts at the dungeon, yet no team was even close to beating it. At this rate, just how many bottles of Black Phenol would be consumed in the end?

Perhaps, at this time, the only guild that was able to run Sosil Valley without encountering such issues was Holy Empire. Thanks to Nie Yan providing their guild with so many supplies, they had enough Black Phenol to freely run the dungeon for some time to come.

When Nie Yan saw that the marketplace's Black Phenol shortage had become so fierce and the prices had catapulted so much in such a short period of time, even he felt considerably taken aback. He believed the players would at least have a little in stock and that the guilds would dispatch their members to gather materials. Yet in the span of a few hours, just as the shortage was only beginning, the price of Black Phenol had already risen to such a terrifying state.

Nevertheless, Nie Yan also understood that this price was also probably the limit. Any higher and those guilds would be losing money every time they ran the dungeon. Of course, who in their right mind would be willing to do that?

I guess it's about time for me to dump my stock into the marketplace!

Nie Yan placed ten bottles of Black Phenol on the auction house, whereupon a fervor of bidding immediately started on them. The bids continuously rose until they all gradually stopped at around fifty copper. With all ten bottles sold, his earnings were rather decent. Afterwards, he listed another ten bottles up for sale. Sure enough, they were all fought over until there were none left.

He proceeded to dump small batches of Black Phenol into the auction house in an unbroken cycle of selling persisted for quite a while.

News of Black Phenol being dumped into the marketplace quickly travelled to the leaders of the various guilds and caused all of them to assemble at the auction house.

Nie Yan walked along the auction house's main auditorium and eventually settled in a seat in the furthest row back. His eyes scanned across the entire place. There were several very familiar faces, all of them belonging to the top brass of the various major guilds. It was obvious the Black Phenol shortage had been an unceasing headache for them.

Sitting not far from him were two other players discussing a topic quietly, though it was still within earshot for him.

“It seems the entire playerbase is concerned about Black Phenol right now. Say, who do you think still has so many bottles to sell? That person consistently puts up batches of ten as soon as their last one is sold. It seems they aren't planning to dump all of their supply at once. They sure are crafty. Selling all of them at once probably won't net as much of a profit. Only by selling it slowly and whetting the appetites of those large guilds can they sell at such a high price.”

“One bottle for fifty coppers, such a price is bordering on a scam. They're earning money like crazy. Too bad the person hid their name when listing the Black Phenol up for auction. No one knows who they are.”

When Nie Yan heard these whispering murmurs, his mouth curved into a faint smile. This was the time for him to earn big!

Due to the fact that he really had too much Black Phenol in his storage, if he didn't get rid of it quickly and allowed the guilds to gather their own steady supply, his own stock might end up going to waste.

Nie Yan spent his time like this in the auction house, just leisurely loitering around. For the time being, he didn't kill monsters or try to level up. His mind was simply relaxing and being carefree.

In a market with such high demand, his supply of Black Phenol sold particularly well. The guilds that managed to purchase some already began resuming their exploration of Sosil Valley, leaving the ones who hadn't feeling incredibly pressured. Granted, even though they knew they were being ripped off, progressing through the new dungeon still needed to happen, didn't it?

Although the Black Phenol was only being sold in small batches, many guilds didn't have Alchemists who could create it. For fear that the current batch might be the last, they couldn't help but purchase a few just in case. Under the pressure of the market's high demand, the price of Black Phenol consistently remained high.

The hysteria over Black Phenol caused money to pour in from all sides, as the funds in Nie Yan's bag piled higher and higher.

After selling over five hundred bottles, he paused to calculate his earnings. He had earned roughly two and a half gold so far from Black Phenol alone. Alongside the profits from the raw materials, Flash Powder, Sheep Transformation Scrolls, and Web Scrolls, he now had a total of sixteen gold in his bag. In the next six or seven days, all of the earnings made by the several dozen guilds running Sosil Valley would end up falling into his pockets. In this early stage of the game, such a frightening sum of money would cause a person to sigh in admiration to no end. Not to mention, he still had three hundred more bottles of Black Phenol, two hundred and twenty recipes, and an enormous amount of raw materials to sell. It was the recipes that were the real moneymakers. The selling price of a single recipe had already skyrocketed to over twenty silver. Furthermore, it was still going in an upward trend. Nie Yan still didn't need to be in a rush to get rid of his recipes. After selling all of the Black Phenol and raw materials first, he could decide then what he would sell the recipes for.

With his pockets being sixteen gold richer, he instantly became extravagantly rich. Even for those large guilds, they would at most have no more than three or four gold. Beginner players all required money. The average players didn't even have enough money to use for themselves, so why would they donate it to their guild? After all, most of them were new recruits, so for the time being, they didn't hold much loyalty or feel a strong sense of belonging to their guilds. Therefore, most guild leaders would be trying to wrack their brains over the problematic matter of raising funds. They could only ask their loyal members, those who had been members in other games, to draw up some funding. However, if they scraped the bottom of the barrel too hard and those subordinates silently grew resentful, this would also negatively influence the guild's growth.

Now that he had money, Nie Yan couldn't allow it to rot in his hands. He would turn his present capital into even more money! That was the sensible way of doing things. As soon as these thoughts ran through his mind, he recalled that he could buy property and land.

At this moment, the game company was already starting to sell the land in Calore. Some residences on the border streets of the city were torn down in order to make way for player constructed shops. Every important section of land on the main streets was currently up for sale. However, Chief Administrator Telus, the person in charge of selling the land, was actually quite free from any workload. The main hall in his building was practically empty. The reason he had no customers was because the price of a single plot of land was at least one gold, while the plots that were in relatively good areas for building shops were valued at several dozen gold. Namely, even those large guilds would be incapable of taking out such a large sum of money to purchase such a plot of land.

As for those cheap plots selling for one or two gold, they were located in less than preferable places that most players disliked, so no one was willing to purchase them, while land in relatively good locations, they couldn't afford. Thus, most players who were rich enough to purchase land could only give up on the thought for the time being.

Though, in the near future, many of the large guilds would have much more capital to spend. The in-game economy would flourish even more, and every good plot of land would be fought over wildly by the various guilds! This was where the future was

headed!

Every guild was unceasingly accumulating their finances in preparation to expand.

If a person bought a plot of land, it didn't matter if they opened their own shop or leased it to others to collect rent, they were all decent options.

With so much money in his pockets, Nie Yan only had to leave one or two gold for his own personal use, and it would cover his daily expenses for quite a while. By using the remaining funds to purchase a plot of land, not only would he be able to keep it, it would also rise in value. Who would have anything against that?

Virtual real-estate was the same as real-estate in the real world. They both possessed value!

Chapter 111 – Upgrade

Calore's downtown area was presently located in the southern district of the city, neighbouring the Mercenary Guild. Most of the NPC shops in the city were concentrated in this area, and it was also where the auction house was located, making the area the central hub for business and player activity. As of right now, the NPC shops in the area only sold goods that would satisfy low level players. In the future, these shops would gradually be replaced by crafting professions that could meet the demands of higher level players who required more advanced goods and equipment. Of course, this shift in the economy would bring about changes in the structure of commerce in the city as well. Also to note was the fact that the game developers would eventually place the real world currency exchange center in the east, causing Calore's downtown area to slowly shift to that region of the city. Business in the south would gradually thin out until the only entity that could draw players in was the Mercenary Guild.

Currently, the plots in Calore's southern district were priced at a minimum of ten gold. A few were even valued at up to thirty to forty gold, whereas the ones in the eastern region would only fetch one or two, some for even less. However, in two to three months, the average value of these relatively cheap plots in the east would rise by at least tenfold and several hundred for the ones in prime locations. In the next ten years, they would skyrocket to even more frightening levels.

Yet, at present, the entire region was a slum, to the extent where there wasn't a single modern building in sight.

Leaving the auction house, Nie Yan headed for the

administrator's office located in the heart of the business hub. After walking for several minutes, he soon approached his destination as a towering white spire came into view. Typical of Viridian architecture, the stone walls were full of exquisite carvings and then further reinforced with mana, resulting in a faint azure glow emitting from their surface. If one inspected more closely, they would see a row of orchids hanging from the building's balcony, allowing their fragrant scent to drift down to the streets below.

Upon arriving at the doorstep, Nie Yan entered the building and saw floors so immaculate and smooth they revealed his own reflection. The more than ten-meter-high ceiling would leave anyone awed at the expansiveness of this place. Additionally, various colorful pieces of artwork were painted across it, free for guests to enjoy during their stay.

As soon as he stepped through the doors, an elderly man walked over to greet him. He wore a deep black, well-ironed military uniform that carried golden epaulettes at the shoulders. Despite his age, he still appeared full of vigor and possessed an aura that was both dignified and domineering.

“Chief Administrator Telus, I've come to purchase some land.”

“I'm happy that you've decided to take up residence in Calore. We welcome any customer who wishes to open up a shop. We especially offer the best services to those who abide by the law. Please, come with me,” Chief Administrator Telus said before heading into his office.

Nie Yan had come here before in his past life, though it was already far too late by then. Even the most remote plots of land were valued at over several thousand to upwards of tens of thousands of gold. It was also during this period that Calore came to be known as the City of Gold. Any piece of it was worth quite a bit of money. Even the most ordinary storefronts could earn a player a significant sum. Within Conviction, merchants became so rich and powerful that they possessed no less if not more influence than the top-tier players. In contrast, he had been powerless and could only leave the chief administrator's office empty handed while filled with regret.

However, in this lifetime, he would be able to obtain a vast number of extremely valuable storefronts for dirt cheap prices before most players were even paying attention to the virtual real-estate market!

“Dear customer, which storefront would you like to purchase?” Chief Administrator Telus inquired, pointing towards a holographic model of the city on his desk. All properties available for purchase were marked, and even their individual prices were clearly displayed.

Nie Yan stared at the eastern region of the city. Presently, there were over twenty properties available. The most expensive ones were two gold while the cheapest were fifty silver.

A few of them were properties that were considered prime real-estate in his past life. One of the locations was even near the yet to be built currency exchange center. The market value of that property had been well over several tens of thousands of gold.

While in the real world, it became even more invaluable. Yet, placed right before his very eyes, such a matchless location was only being sold for two gold!

No other fact caused his heart to beat as wildly as this!

“I would like the storefront over here...” Nie Yan said, pointing to the property near the yet to be built currency exchange center. In the moment that he spoke, his heart began racing in his chest and he felt an intense excitement that was almost impossible to suppress. He barely held himself back from shouting out in joy.

This investment of two gold would create unlimited possibilities for him in the future!

He handed over the money to Chief Administrator Telus, and without missing a beat, the chief administrator handed back a title deed for the property, which came in the appearance of a scroll.

This thin, somewhat ancient scroll served as a legal document in the virtual world. The contract language and terms in this document were the same as the ones in reality and bore the same protection by the law.

After the first transaction, Nie Yan proceeded to purchase eleven more properties in prime real estate locations. Two of them were especially large, occupying an enormous area of land that made it perfect for building a towering auction house. He hoped to make it the most prosperous place in the entire eastern district.

Nie Yan glanced at his bag. After purchasing the rights to so many properties, he was only left with two gold.

In any world, the best way of earning money wasn't to set up a commercial enterprise but rather to invest with impeccable foresight. By using money to create more money, he would achieve the goal of expanding his capital. Being reborn had given him many opportunities that he had missed out on in his past life.

Calore would become the Viridian Empire's most flourishing city in the future while these twelve properties would become the most profitable. Even if he didn't open his own shop and only rented them out, he would still rake in tremendous sums of money.

「System: For purchasing five or more properties in the city, your Influence in Calore has increased by 5.」

The boost in Influence would be helpful to him when doing business in and around every part of the city. When a player's Influence reached thirty, even if their name was marked in red, they would still be able to freely walk the streets of the city and enjoy the protection of the guards. When purchasing goods from the NPC shops, they wouldn't dare to price gouge the player as they pleased, simply for the fact that Influence represented status in the city.

Right after killing another player, he would still be able to parade himself ostentatiously around the streets! Just how wonderful of a situation was that? Though with his low-key nature, he absolutely wouldn't commit such an attention-seeking act.

“In the future, when you open a shop, you’ll have to pay 1% of your profits every month as income tax. It is also necessary that you improve your shop within the next two months. Furthermore, you will have to pay 0.05% of your shop’s value as property tax. The most you can be behind on your payments is three months. Failure to repay your debts within that time limit will result in the Viridian Empire seizing your property, as per stated in your contract. Do you wish to make any further inquiries?” Chief Administrator Telus asked.

“No, that’ll be fine,” Nie Yan replied. In comparison to the benefits these properties would bring him, these taxes could be completely disregarded considering how immaterial they were.

After completing the transaction, he stored the deeds away, then stared at the model of the city. He could see piles of gold overflowing from these properties as they towered over the eastern region of Calore.

Now, he simply had to wait for the eventual expansion of the region!

Having finished his business, Nie Yan left the building with a sense of satisfaction. Even if he stagnated and did nothing from now on, the slowly appreciating properties almost ensured his future earnings would satisfy his expenses for a long time to come. Naturally, he wouldn’t become complacent after acquiring these deeds. The grand oceans allowed the fish to leap, and the vast skies allowed the birds to fly. He still had much more business to take care of.

Nie Yan headed back to the auction house. Aside from the Black Phenol and materials, he also placed a batch of Flash Powder, Web Scrolls, and Sheep Transformation Scrolls up for auction as well. Though, the majority of the money he earned would be used to purchase things that might spike in value later on. For example, right now he was focused on gathering consumables that cured petrification and equipment that increased Spirit for the upcoming dungeon, Medusa's Lair.

He also purchased several Fortune Gems in addition to the fifteen he already had in his possession. For him, selling these gems or sitting on them while waiting for their value to rise wasn't worth his time. That meant the best course of action was to use them to strengthen his equipment right now. Only then could he get the most out of them.

After thinking about what he should upgrade, the Dark Gold dagger, [Blood Pact](#), popped into his mind. Now that he thought about it, it was probably the best piece of gear out of all the equipment that was currently in his possession. Although it was a Level 0 dagger, it was still Dark Gold-grade. It certainly wasn't lacking in attack, but the most significant aspect was that it boasted a fairly rare property, Lifesteal. If he were able to raise this dagger's attack, then it would become even more perfect.

However, most players felt that using Fortune Gems on a Level 0 weapon was too much of a waste. After all, these gems cost five silver each! At the very least, many would wait until they reached the mid thirties, when levelling became much slower, to use such an expensive item, but Nie Yan didn't have any such apprehensions. He had no shortage of money-making schemes to

use in the future. Thus, if he really wanted to upgrade his equipment again, he could simply purchase more Fortune Gems at the auction house. All Elite or Lord monsters over Level 5 had a chance of dropping them. Usually, ordinary players who got their hands on some often couldn't bear to use it for themselves, so they would place them up for sale on the auction house, making it so the market would never run out.

Aside from increasing the success rate of socketing gems, a Fortune Gem (1) could also raise a weapon's attack by ten and a piece of armour's defense by fifteen. These bonuses were enough to make many players go crazy. The caveat was that the success rate would fall depending on the number of upgrades. For the first five stages, the success rate was sixty percent. If it was successful, then all was fine, but upon failure, the piece of equipment would lose an upgrade stage. From stage six to ten, the success rate would fall to fifty percent, and upon failure, five stages would be lost. From the eleventh to the fifteenth stage, the success rate remained fifty percent, but all upgrades would be lost upon failure. As for the final stages, stage sixteen to twenty, each successive upgrade would provide the piece of equipment with an additional, formidable skill. Any piece of equipment that had been upgraded twenty times were existences that were as rare as Legendary-grade equipment.

When upgrading a piece of equipment, each additional gem would increase the success rate by a certain amount.

The concept of upgrading equipment with Fortune Gems was often the bane of players with gambling addictions. Those who were lucky would be able to raise several stages with only a few gems, thus creating an invaluable piece of equipment. In contrast,

there were also some incredibly unfortunate fools, who, when falling prey to a moment of weakness, would try their luck only to lose over ten upgrades all at once.

No matter what, upgrading with Fortune Gems was an activity only for the rich. Ordinary players definitely wouldn't dare to do so, or more accurately, they couldn't afford to do so!

Not only did Nie Yan have fifteen Fortune Gems, he also possessed Pandora's Box¹ which had the ability to influence success rate. Thus, he was itching to give it a try. Besides, for the first ten stages, there was no chance of losing all upgrades.

After confirming his decision, he placed Blood Pact and one Fortune Gem into Pandora's Box. The dagger glowed with a blood red aura while beside it was a gem that emitted a dazzling radiance.

「System: Do you wish to upgrade this piece of equipment?」

Nie Yan gazed fixedly at Conviction's clock. He calculated whether the time was on an even cycle or an odd cycle as he watched the passing seconds, his pupils reflecting each successive digit.

Now!

Nie Yan confirmed the upgrade.

「System: Upgrade successful! Blood Pact → Blood Pact +1」

My luck's pretty good! He examined the properties of the improved Blood Pact.

Blood Pact +1 (Dark Gold)

Requirements: Level 1

Properties: Attack 33–36, Dexterity +11, Critical +12, Lifesteal 3%

Attack Speed: 2.3

Weight: 3lb

Restrictions: Thief, can be equipped by all factions.

The upgrade was a success, resulting in Blood Pact's attack increasing by ten and its level requirement being raised by one. As such, its attack was now better than some Level 5 Gold daggers.

Notes:

[1\] Pandora's Box](#) increases luck by 5 on even cycles and decreases luck by 5 on odd cycles

Chapter 112 – Blood Pact +7

Nie Yan was far from being satisfied with just a single upgrade.

He placed Blood Pact back into Pandora’s Box along with another Fortune Gem and tried to upgrade it again. If the game time was on an even cycle, then his success rate would be increased to around eighty percent.

「System: Upgrade successful! Blood Pact +1 → Blood Pact +2」

Nie Yan examined Blood Pact’s new properties.

Blood Pact +2 (Dark Gold)

Requirements: Level 2

Properties: Attack 43–46, Dexterity +11, Critical +12, Lifesteal 3%

Attack Speed: 2.3

Weight: 3lb

Restrictions: Thief, can be equipped by all factions.

Even with this, Nie Yan still wasn’t completely satisfied. He retrieved another Fortune Gem, placed it inside Pandora’s Box, and continued upgrading. After clicking confirm, the gem began radiating brighter and brighter until...「Poof!」The gem burst into

ashes. He felt his heart sink. The probability of failing was only twenty percent, yet he had just failed on only his second attempt. It seemed even Pandora's Box couldn't help him with his innately poor luck.

「System: Upgrade failed! Blood Pact +2 → Blood Pact +1」

However, he wouldn't allow this setback to discourage him. The price of a Fortune Gem alone might be enough to frighten most players, but Nie Yan wasn't most players. Such a trivial sum wouldn't be able to affect him. Failing this time meant losing ten silver, a loss he was entirely willing to bear.

「System: Upgrade successful! Blood Pact +1 → Blood Pact +2」

「System: Upgrade successful! Blood Pact +2 → Blood Pact +3」

「System: Upgrade successful! Blood Pact +3 → Blood Pact +4」

「System: Upgrade failed! Blood Pact +4 → Blood Pact +3」

...

Even with an eighty percent success rate, he still ended up failing two times before finally reaching his initial target. Lady Luck just didn't seem to be on his side.

In total, it took him nine gems to advance Blood Pact to the fifth stage. As he took it out of the box to examine, he noticed a slight change in its appearance. It seemed to shine more brilliantly than before.

Blood Pact +5 (Dark Gold)

Requirements: Level 5

Properties: Attack 73–76, Dexterity +11, Critical +12, Lifesteal 3%

Attack Speed: 2.3

Weight: 3lb

Restrictions: Thief, can be equipped by all factions.

Blood Pact at its fifth stage already possessed an attack that was far beyond the vast majority of weapons in the game, even surpassing Level 10 Dark Gold weapons by a good margin. He still had eight Fortune Gems remaining in his inventory, so getting Blood Pact to the sixth stage probably wouldn't be too much of a problem. According to how the upgrade system worked, getting the dagger to the seventh stage would be worthwhile. It was only

when upgrading to the eighth or ninth stage that the stakes began to rise, as a single failure from stage six and onwards would drop the weapon back to the fifth stage. As for getting a piece of equipment to stage ten or higher, only those who possessed incredibly good luck or were filthy rich would dare to make the attempt.

Nie Yan placed Blood Pact back into Pandora's Box along with another Fortune Gem. His chances of upgrading the dagger to the sixth stage was seventy percent. This could already be considered fairly high, since, without the aid of the box, it was usually fifty percent. In the game's current state, a stage seven piece of equipment was as rare as a qilin horn or phoenix feather.

As Blood Pact emitted a bright red aura from inside Pandora's Box, Nie Yan found it difficult to calm his nerves. After all, this might be the creation of the game's first stage six or seven weapon. He couldn't help but be nervous.

With a seventy percent success rate, I might as well give it a shot!

Nie Yan clenched his teeth and hit confirm.

The gem began shining brilliantly. Then, with a final flash of light, its essence was transferred to the dagger. Nie Yan felt as if an explosion had gone off in his mind as he watched this occur before his very eyes. The upgrade was a success!

After the golden radiance slowly dispersed, only the dagger remained in Pandora's Box. A bedeviling crimson aura spread out

as if to bask the world in its glorious presence.

A stage six dagger... Awesome!

The next step was to get the dagger to stage seven, a task which made even Nie Yan quiver under the pressure. A seventy percent chance of success was indeed quite high, but that still meant there was a thirty percent chance of failure. It was precisely this fact that made him extremely tense.

After careful deliberation, he decided to give it a shot and placed another Fortune Gem inside Pandora's Box.

He clenched his teeth and hit upgrade. It has to succeed!

Although it wouldn't be too much of a loss to him if he failed, he was still losing money!

「System: Do you wish to upgrade Blood Pact +6?」

Yes!

He steeled himself and hit confirm on the system prompt. The visual effects started playing, ending once more with a flash of golden light. It was a success! A wave of relief and happiness washed over Nie Yan. Apparently all of his bad luck had been used up in the previous two failures, as the dagger was successfully

upgraded to the seventh stage without a hitch.

My luck's pretty good! He examined the properties of the improved Blood Pact.

Blood Pact +7 (Dark Gold)

Requirements: Level 7

Properties: Attack 93–96, Dexterity +11, Critical +12, Lifesteal 3%

Attack Speed: 2.3

Weight: 3lb

Restrictions: Thief, can be equipped by all factions.

He had been relatively lucky this time around. With this, Blood Pact now possessed almost one hundred attack, nearly rivaling even some Level 15 weapons.

A Fortune Gem was quite a costly thing. There were very few, if any, players who would be as crazy as Nie Yan and attempt to upgrade a piece of equipment to the seventh stage. Even the leaders of the largest guilds wouldn't dare to test their luck. At the very least, they would be extremely prudent by taking their equipment to a Jewelcrafter for the upgrade. In the entire game, there was probably no one else who had such a high success rate in upgrading equipment like Nie Yan.

Any other player would likely need to spend, at the very least,

twice as many Fortune Gems to upgrade a piece of equipment to the seventh stage.

Blood Pact was now as brilliant as a ruby and surrounded by a pulsing, blood red aura that seemed to emit a murderous intent. Even if he hid the visual effects on the dagger, anyone could see with just a glance that it was out of the ordinary.

Attempting to upgrade the dagger to the eighth stage would be slightly risky. This was because if he failed, it would fall back to stage five.

Aside from Blood Pact, Nie Yan also used two Fortune Gems to upgrade his other dagger, [Assassin's Decree](#), to stage two, raising its attack by twenty.

Assassin's Decree (Gold): Secondary Weapon

Requirements: Level 7

Properties: Attack 46–49, Strength +16, Accuracy +12

Attack Speed: 2.5

Weight: 3 lb

Restrictions: Can be equipped by all factions.

Assassin's Decree was merely a Gold-grade weapon, so its stats weren't that great in comparison. He was only using it for now until he found a suitable replacement, which would be pretty soon, so it wasn't worthwhile to upgrade it any further.

Nie Yan checked his status page. While wielding these two top-tier daggers, his attack leapt to one hundred and seventy-six. Most of the Thieves who were currently Level 7 had an attack of around a hundred, so this was already terrific. In fact, it was practically blasphemous for a player to have such stats! At this point in the game, the quality of his gear would most likely make any honest, hard-working player froth at the mouth from rage.

Having finished buying properties and upgrading his gear, Nie Yan returned to the auction house and listed another batch of raw materials and Black Phenol for sale. Then, he opened the auction house's catalogue and searched for equippable gear that boosted Intelligence.

However, it seemed there were fairly few pieces of equipment that matched such criteria in the market, though this was unsurprising. After all, what would a Thief do with Intelligence? The players who obtained such equipment would probably throw it in a recycler to be broken down into raw materials.

After searching for what seemed like half a day, he felt exasperated. He still wasn't able to find a single piece of equipment. If I can't find any here, don't tell me I have to go farming for them myself...? Just how many years will that take!?

Thunderbolt Blaze was an intermediate scroll that required thirty Intelligence to cast. An intermediate scroll was still rather rare among the current playerbase, but after everyone raised their levels, just about any average joe would have one or two of these scrolls for emergency use. So, if he sat on the scroll for too long, its usefulness would diminish. Unfortunately, even the rarest of items

today would become common commodities over time.

He wanted to make use of the Thunderbolt Blaze scroll, but he didn't have sufficient Intelligence nor could he find the equipment to alleviate this issue. Just what was he going to do?

While wracking his brains over this problem, Sleepy Fox suddenly popped into his mind. Nie Yan didn't know if Sleepy Fox had any equipment that increased Intelligence, but it was possible that he had some lying around. After all, for a guild as large as Holy Empire, picking up one or two pieces of Thief equipment that increased Intelligence was quite common. Even those pieces of equipment that no one would use wouldn't be so easily discarded. Any sensible guild would use these items to pad the treasury. Just in case it actually did have some use, it could be easily retrieved when needed.

「You there?」Nie Yan sent Sleepy Fox a message.

「Yeah, I'm there. We've already found the skill books for the five passive skills you wanted. As for the two active skills, we're out of luck for the time being, but we should be able to get them in the afternoon,」Sleepy Fox said apologetically. Thanks to the large quantity of Black Phenol and materials Nie Yan provided them, Holy Empire was able to get an advantage over the other guilds in running Sosil Valley. Although their team had yet to meet the boss, as they were still stuck on fighting the common mobs, the profits were nevertheless astonishing. They were able to obtain quite a few decent pieces of equipment. The experience wasn't bad either. A single Werewolf provided eight hundred experience, so their levelling was much faster than killing mobs outside. Considering

all the benefits Nie Yan provided him, he felt ashamed that they were still unable to fulfill a simple request.

At this time, the skill books Nie Yan was looking for, Backstab and Eviscerate, were fairly rare drops. Even a large guild such as Holy Empire would only be able to obtain a few in a single day. The demand for these skills was simply too high. As for those five passive skills, although relatively uncommon as well, they weren't expensive or highly sought after by most players. Therefore, they were quite easy to find.

Truthfully, Sleepy Fox was rather puzzled as to why a Thief like Nie Yan would want to learn so many Strength-increasing skills. What was the point of filling up so many skill slots right now? Those skills would eventually be forgotten anyway. Wasn't he just wasting money at this point? Though, after thinking about it, Sleepy Fox recalled that Nie Yan was perhaps the richest solo player he had met so far, so why would he care about losing some pocket change?

「No worries, there's no rush. Just hold onto those skill books for now. I actually contacted you for something else. Do you have any skill books or equipment lying around that I can wear, ones that increase Intelligence?」Nie Yan replied.

「Intelligence? For a Thief...?」Sleepy Fox asked in a flabbergasted manner.

「Yep... Thief equipment or skills that increase Intelligence. I'd prefer if it was equipment,」Nie Yan said. If he had to learn a skill for the sake of increasing Intelligence, when he had no more skill

slots, he would have no choice but to erase it to make space. At least with equipment, he'd still be able to recoup some of his losses.

「We should have some lying around... I'll tell one of my subordinates to search through the treasury and check,」Sleepy Fox replied, as he became ever more baffled. While it was somewhat understandable for Thief to want items that raised their Strength, just why in the world would one ever need Intelligence? Was it possible that Nie Yan had picked up a piece of equipment that had an Intelligence requirement?

Nie Yan patiently waited for Sleepy Fox's reply.

「So... after checking, we've got a pair of boots with +7 Intelligence, leather armour with +8 Intelligence, a pair of gloves with +7 Intelligence, and two skill books, Farsight and Comprehension, which raise Intelligence by nine and six respectively. That's all we found,」Sleepy Fox said.

「It's enough. Let me borrow the boots, leather armour, and gloves for a while. As for the Comprehension skill book, name a price.」

「No need. It's not anything valuable, so feel free to take them all,」Sleepy Fox replied. Thief equipment that increased Intelligence wasn't worth very much. Even if they placed these pieces of equipment in the auction house for a low price, it didn't necessarily mean someone would buy them. Usually, they would simply sit in the treasury until enough of them piled up to be thrown into the recycler all at once.

「Thanks. I'll return them later. Just send them through the mail,」Nie Yan said. If all these pieces of equipment were sold in the marketplace, the profit earned still wouldn't amount to a single silver. The player would be lucky to receive fifty copper. Sleepy Fox would never be willing to collect payment on such items, and Nie Yan didn't care to force him either.

「Alright,」Sleepy Fox said. He believed Nie Yan definitely had a good reason for borrowing all these pieces of equipment that increased Intelligence. However, since Nie Yan didn't tell him, he wouldn't ask too many questions.

After a while, Nie Yan headed to his personal storage and retrieved the items that he had asked for. Altogether there were four items that increased Intelligence, three of which were pieces of equipment while the fourth was a skill book.

On top of his base stats, these four items raised his Intelligence past thirty points, enabling him to meet the requirements to cast the Thunderbolt Blaze Scroll!

Chapter 113 – Thunderbolt Blaze

Nie Yan headed to the transfer point and proceeded to Tasoyi Village. Retracing the steps of his last visit, he traversed Plague Forest, the Gaia Monitor's nest, and eventually arrived back at the overhanging cliff.

The cold wind, that originated from the Desolate Tundra of the North, whistled through the ravine. Although it would inevitably warm up during its journey here, currently the chilling nip still persisted.

As Nie Yan stood at the edge of the cliff, he stared at the dense forest canopy below.

The ravine was the central region of the Plague Canyon and also where Windletter Herb, a primary ingredient required to manufacture Intermediate Anti-Paralysis Potions, grew in abundance. At the peak of its demand during Nie Yan's past life, this alchemy ingredient had sold for up to seventeen silver per plant. Moreover, since the mob density in the zone was relatively high and mostly consisted of Quilled Kobolds, a mob that was very slow and possessed no long range attacks, it became a favourite training ground among Mages who had reached Level 20.

The only inconvenience was that it was quite tedious to get to this zone. In order to do so, players would need to detour around a large mountain range. Usually, most players would set out on this journey by horseback. However, since Nie Yan didn't have a mount, who knows just how much time he would waste if he were to actually walk the entire distance. Thus, the best option available

was to take a shortcut by jumping off this cliff.

Naturally, this was only possible thanks to the Featherfall Jewel's ability; otherwise, the fall would undoubtedly mean certain death.

Nie Yan finally jumped off the cliff.

The wind whistled past his ears as he rapidly descended into the ravine below.

Falling from several hundred meters high was still considerably exhilarating. After dropping over two hundred meters, his descending velocity was still constantly increasing. Soon, the air resistance made it difficult for him to keep his eyes open. As the ground drew closer and closer, he hastily activated the Featherfall Jewel's ability.

Almost immediately, his falling speed slowed down to a crawl. Nie Yan adjusted his position accordingly and searched for a suitable location to land at. Eventually, after finding an opening in the canopy, he safely came into contact with the ground.

Nie Yan didn't immediately take action but scanned the surrounding with his eyes instead. The area he landed in was a small meadow, roughly fifty meters in size, that thankfully happened to be beside the rock face.

This spot should be fine... Nie Yan thought. The topography in

this meadow was quite suitable for his plan. He also quickly discovered many Windletter Herbs in the area. This was clearly an area that wasn't frequented by other players, as the plant was freely growing everywhere in his surroundings. Unfortunately, his Gathering skill hadn't yet reached the required level to harvest them.

Eventually, a Quilled Kobold wandered into the meadow. This monster was a bipedal, dumpy porcupine that only reached half a person's height. They wielded small wooden clubs studded with wolf teeth. Their backs were covered in sharp, ash gray quills, which provided them with an extremely strong physical defense, and even enabled them to reflect some damage. However, not only were they especially slow, they were also vulnerable to magic, which made them easy targets for Mages. This one for example, upon discovering Nie Yan's presence, emitted an odd, high-pitched squeak before charging straight at him.

Nie Yan instantly used Transcendent Insight to examine the Quilled Kobold.

Quilled Kobold: Level 23

Health: 1,300/1,300

A Level 23 Quilled Kobold's health and defense were both frighteningly high.

Nie Yan retrieved his crossbow and shot three bolts at the approaching Quilled Kobold.

-10, -11, -10, three damage values rose above its head. However, as a Level 23 monster, its health regeneration was astonishingly high. Thus, the damage Nie Yan had dealt was quickly negated as its health had already recovered back to full.

Nie Yan activated Swift Retreat. With his movement speed increased by thirty percent, he was able to easily put a large distance between himself and the Quilled Kobold.

After assessing its speed, he became well aware of the situation. As long as he didn't allow the Kobold to get too close, he would be in no danger whatsoever.

Nie Yan proceeded to run deeper into the forest and began to draw the aggro of other monsters. Whenever he came across a Quilled Kobold wandering around, he would fire a few bolts at it as he passed by. After being attacked, they would immediately pursue him while flailing their clubs. In this fashion, he continued to aggro more monsters while maintaining an optimal distance that wasn't too close nor too far away from the monsters.

As he led the angry monsters on a chase around the forest, the mob began to resemble a train with Nie Yan as the conductor. Starting with only one Quilled Kobold, more and more joined the chase, until the size of the mob had exceeded twenty. Eventually, he led the entire mob of Kobolds back to the meadow he had originally landed at.

Having gotten the Kobolds where he wanted them, he accelerated his pace and quickly left their line of sight. Afterwards, the Kobolds deaggroed and returned to an idle state.

As such, a group of fifty to sixty of these Quilled Kobolds had flooded this open area. Luckily for Nie Yan, it was unlikely that this group would disperse and wander out of the area anytime soon.

Nie Yan ran off to another region of the forest and continued to aggro monsters with his crossbow. Before ten minutes had even passed, he had gathered another mob of a similar size behind him. However, unlike the previous group, several of the Kobolds in this group were comparatively larger and faster than the rest. Nonetheless, since there were so many ordinary Kobolds packed around them, obstructing their movements, they were unable to have any significant impact on the chase.

He once again used Transcendent Insight to examine one of these larger Kobolds.

Quilled Kobold (Leader): Level 25

Health: 2,100/2,100

They were Leader-class monsters that possessed significantly higher health. In normal circumstances, he would never dare to tangle with these Leader-class Kobolds. However, at present, even they were his prey.

Soon, he brought over the group of Kobolds to the meadow, before breaking off their aggro by moving out of their line of sight. Now, together with the previous group, this already crowded place started to become congested.

Nie Yan's corralling of the Kobolds to the meadow progressed smoothly. After half an hour, he had managed to lead four more large groups of Kobolds into the area. This small meadow was now thoroughly crowded with over three hundred Quilled Kobolds, a number that would leave anyone completely speechless.

Finally finished... A faint smile could be seen on Nie Yan's face as he stared at the group of Kobolds in this meadow. The final step would be to reap the rewards of all his efforts!

He nimbly evaded the attacks of the Kobolds as he made his way toward the rock face, then he activated the Crawler Ring's ability. An attractive force immediately emerged from both his hands, and using this attractive force, he began to quickly climb up the rock face. After reaching an appropriate height, he found a suitable ledge to stand on.

As he firmly stood on the ledge he looked down upon the meadow and saw the Quilled Kobolds everywhere!

If he waited too much longer, all these monsters would begin to disperse!

Nie Yan switched out some of his gear with the three pieces of equipment that increased Intelligence, then retrieved the Thunderbolt Blaze Scroll and activated it.

「System: Do you wish to cast Thunderbolt Blaze?」

Yes!

「System: Casting Thunderbolt Blaze Scroll...」

As he began to read the words on the scroll aloud a succession of hard-to-pronounce invocation syllables left his mouth.

Casting this scroll required a set of syllables and gestures. In other words, it would require ten seconds to cast. The scroll in his hands gave him the feeling as if it was a giant sphere of fire, raging and ready to combust.

It was time, the Thunderbolt Blaze scroll was activating!

The fire elements in the atmosphere frantically converged, making the surrounding atmosphere increasingly hot as waves of scorching air rose up into the sky. It seemed as if some type of otherworldly destructive power was being awakened, ready to rain destruction upon wherever it was summoned. Clouds of flames, that resembled the beautiful shade of red from a sunset, began to pulsate in the sky.

Yet such a dazzling existence represented utter destruction.

Thunderbolt Blaze was an area of effect magic that called down a storm of flames upon the enemy and could only be learned by an Elementalist. It was also a rank one magic from the Elemental Palace, which meant that its destructive power this early in the

game was astonishingly powerful. It could even deal decent damage to monsters over Level 30, so there was no need to talk about these Quilled Kobolds that were only slightly over Level 20.

The crowd of Kobolds apparently sensed the danger and began to grow restless. Before long they began to disperse in every direction.

In life and death battles in his past life, he had learned that ten seconds was a very long time. Many things could occur in ten seconds. In fact, magic could still be easily interrupted by an enemy when it was mid-cast. It was also enough time for a Thief to erupt with a fervor of skills, dishing out their entire combo which could kill a Mage on the spot. However, in this current situation, ten seconds was actually quite short. By the time the Quilled Kobolds reacted to the danger, it was already too late. From the start, ten seconds was never enough time for them to safely flee from the meadow.

Nie Yan aimed in an area where the Kobolds were the most concentrated.

Thunderbolt Blaze!

The blazing cloud began to congeal in the sky, before it rained down flames on the entire area.

A frightening torrent of fire!

「Boom! Boom! Boom!」Spheres of flames bombarded the Quilled Kobolds, causing sparks of fire to fly everywhere as the Kobolds let out mournful cries.

It resembled a scene straight out of the apocalypse. Wave after wave of fire rained down, pushing all of the Quilled Kobolds in a twenty-meter radius down to the ground with so much force that they weren't even able to lift their heads up.

In the midst of this fiery hell, a vast cloud of damage values, -200, -200, -200, rose into the air every second and blotted out everything else. Just how spectacular of a sight was this!?

Even the tanky Leader-class Kobolds were unable to endure such terrifying damage!

Nearly ten full waves of flames rained down upon the area in the spell's fifteen-second duration, leaving all of the Quilled Kobolds fully roasted!

In the most concentrated area of the spell, the Quilled Kobolds resembled harvested wheat as they toppled over by the dozens.

「System: You have successfully slain a Quilled Kobold. +1800% experience for killing a monster above your level. You have received 5,290 experience points.」

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received 5,290 experience points.」

...

While all this was happening, Nie Yan looked at his experience bar. It was filling up at a frightening rate. 56%... 67%... 83%... 「Ding! Dong!」The crisp sound of the system prompt echoed out. He had levelled up to Level 8!

However, it didn't end here. His experience bar was still continuing to fill up at the same alarming rate. 12%... 56%... 73%...

「System: You have successfully slain a Quilled Kobold (Leader). +2800% experience for killing a monster above your level. You have received 25,290 experience points.」

「System: You have successfully slain a Quilled Kobold (Leader). +2800% experience for killing a monster above your level. You have received 25,290 experience points.」

...

Nie Yan noticed his experience had yet again reached one hundred percent. A brilliant radiance enveloped him while the melodious jingle played again. Another level up. Now he was Level 9, yet the experience bar still didn't stop. Only when it reached fifty-six percent did it finally come to a complete stop.

What a frightening amount of experience!

Nie Yan had only been Level 7 while these Quilled Kobolds were all Level 20 or higher. Hence, the experience multiplier was quite astonishing. As such, on top of their base experience, he had received experience equal to at least eighteen times the base experience, so the amount of experience he had received for each Kobold was excessive beyond reason.

The incredible amount of experience caused Nie Yan to go from Level 7 directly to Level 9. Not only that, but he was also more than halfway to Level 10! If Sleepy Fox were there to witness Nie Yan's astonishing levelling speed, he would probably faint from shock!

Nie Yan suppressed his excitement as he examined the destruction left behind by Thunderbolt Blaze. After a short while, the remnants of the spell had already slowly begun to scatter. The most havoc was done to the central region, which was now a complete mess. There were Kobold corpses scattered all over the place while the earth was charred black. Quite a few of the corpses even sparkled with light, which was a clear sign that items had been dropped by these Kobolds upon their deaths.

Thunderbolt Blaze only affected everything in a twenty meter radius, so there were still quite a few Kobolds who had survived because they were outside of the spell's range. However, they all had long scattered and fled due to the terrifying might of the spell.

Thus, he would be able to safely retrieve the items that had dropped from the corpses.

Chapter 114 – Insei Rais The Cripple

Nie Yan leapt off the ledge, descending the rock face, and proceeded to collect his spoils of war.

From the Leader class Kobolds, he obtained five pieces of Silver-grade equipment, each one for a different profession, Warrior, Thief, Mage, Paladin, and Priest, but they were only for Level 20s. By the time he reached that level, how could mere Silver-grade equipment possibly catch his eye?

He threw the equipment into his bag, before beginning to collect the money that dropped from the Kobolds. Confirming that he hadn't missed anything, he began tallying his profits—twelve silver, which was a considerable sum.

Nonetheless, the main purpose of this trip had been to quickly increase his level. With that accomplished, He put his normal equipment back on and threw the Intelligence increasing equipment into his bag then retrieved a Return Scroll.

Twenty seconds later, a brilliant radiance enveloped him as he was transferred back to the city. Before doing anything else, he checked the leaderboard rankings. Currently, the rank one player was also no higher than Level 9, the same as him.

The vast majority of players had yet to surpass Level 5. Seeing this, Nie Yan no longer felt the need to rush and raise his level. At least at the moment, his main priority was retrieving the second chapter from the Book of Order.

Suddenly, he received a call...

「Boss, I-I...」

「What? Speak up.」

「The materials you gave me, I ended up using them all for concocting, only...」Bird stammered nervously.

「Oh? So what were the results?」

「You can probably make back three silver... I'm really sorry... it's just that my success rate is really low...」Bird responded in a rather embarrassed tone. He understood full well that the alchemy ingredients Nie Yan had provided were worth at least ten silver. After diligently practicing, he had managed to burn through this supply in less than a day. Yet despite his earnest efforts, he couldn't even recoup a third of the costs. No matter how rich his boss might be, Bird feared that such incompetence wouldn't be tolerated by anyone.

「Head to the Alchemist Guild. I'll meet you by the entrance.」Nie Yan sucked in a cold breath of air after hearing Bird's results. Even incompetence should have its limits...Wasn't this guy's success rate a bit too low? If he had given the same amount of materials to any other Alchemist, although it would be unlikely to earn a large profit, at least he wouldn't be making a loss! Just why were most of these materials going to waste when they entered Bird's hands?

「Alright...」Uneasiness had long crept upon Bird, as he even bordered on complete despair. It seemed this time around Nie Yan was probably going to fire him.

...

Bird impatiently paced back and forth in front of the Alchemist Guild's entrance. Nie Yan had only just asked him to meet up, but he was already jumping to conclusions. He was definitely going to be given the boot.

Various Alchemists entered and exited the Alchemist Guild. Although their attires were varied, the vast majority had silver moon badges on their chests, a symbol of an Apprentice Alchemist. Occasionally, one or two Junior Alchemists wearing a gold moon badge could be seen as well. When one of these players passed by, an expression of envy could be seen on Bird's face.

At this point in time, the gold badge on their chest represented a noble status. Within a guild, these Alchemists were highly valued because the pills, potions, tonics, and other concoctions they could prepare were extremely vital for the guild's growth!

Generally, a large quantity of alchemy materials would be provided to an Apprentice Alchemist upon joining a guild, but in exchange, they received none of the profits from their concoctions. In essence, they would serve as nothing more than free labour. On the other hand, when they were able to increase their proficiency in Alchemy and ascend to the rank of a Junior Alchemist, their

status would soar by leaps and bounds. Once such a talent worthy of being nurtured was discovered, the talent would receive generous benefits, and from receiving no profit whatsoever, their income would suddenly become comparable to a white collar worker.

It wasn't long ago that Bird also dreamed of such a leisurely position as a valued guild Alchemist. Though at present, he had already given up on such an extravagant hope.

Dark Hero, the guild Bird formerly belonged to, was a well-known name. Prior to Conviction's release, they had long secured a strong presence in several other games. Although they weren't big players in Conviction, they were nonetheless much more united than the average guild. The only reason they had made an exception and allowed Bird to enter their prestigious ranks was because he obtained a hidden skill. Though, after only several days, he was expelled because of his abysmal success rate. They quickly realized that if they wished to nurture such an incompetent Alchemist, who was devoid of any skill, it would take an unimaginable toll on their resources. Even though they were by no means poor, money didn't simply rain from the sky into their pockets.

Why was he unable to accomplish anything, while there were many others who had already struck it rich in the game?

Since he only had enough money left to get by for a couple more months in real life, Bird felt an indescribable sense of urgency. Just as his circumstances were taking a turn for the better, after finding another backer who was willing to help him grow, he ended up

messing up yet again. Reasonably speaking, every Apprentice Alchemist should have roughly the same success rates while concocting, yet why was his so low?

As Bird nervously paced back and forth near the entrance, he happened to raise his head and notice Nie Yan walking toward the building.

“B-boss...!” Bird awkwardly exclaimed, not knowing what else to say.

“Save it for later, let’s head inside first. Do you have your own workshop yet?” Nie Yan asked. The Alchemist Guild had many private workshops that players could rent for thirty copper a day, enabling them to work freely without being distracted by any outside disturbance. As for those who couldn’t afford to rent a private workshop, they would have no choice but to endeavor in the bustling halls of the Alchemist Guild, where the noise and clamor was likely to negatively influence their concocting.

“No, I don’t. Renting one is too expensive...” Bird responded. He was unwilling to part with so much money just for the sake of a quiet workplace.

Nie Yan headed over to the receptionist. The pine wood desk she worked behind was patterned with a rippling wood grain, giving it a sense of antiqueness and succinctness. The beautiful NPC who was wearing a blue flower dress went by the name Salania. Her eyebrows resembled crescents while her eyes were as blue as sapphire. She had a straight nose, and two locks of hair hung down from her shoulders with a ruby at each end. In every sense

possible, she perfectly captured the essence of Viridian grace, and the game's technology was able to present this fluidly, interpreting the word "perfection" with flawless accuracy.

"Hello, how can I help you today?" Salania asked. Her voice was akin to a nightingale, exceedingly pleasant to listen to.

Such a beauty would inevitably cause any man's heart to start racing.

Though for Nie Yan, he had long become accustomed to these NPCs. Not affected in the slightest, he said, "I'd like to rent a private workshop."

"What grade of workshop would you like to rent? There are common, fine, and luxurious workshops available to rent at thirty copper a day, five silver a day, and sixty silver a day respectively," Salania responded.

"A common workshop please," Nie Yan said. At this point in the game, a common grade workshop was already enough for any Alchemist.

"Isn't this too much of a waste?" Bird cried out in alarm. This was another thirty copper going down the drain every day! Nie Yan had already spent so much money on him yet he failed to produce any results, a fact which made him feel deeply ashamed.

"It's only thirty coppers," Nie Yan selected a workshop and paid

the deposit, before turning to Bird and saying, “Alright, let’s go.”

Bird followed Nie Yan from behind as they entered the private workshop.

Nie Yan scanned the area with his eyes. The workshop wasn’t large, only a five by five meter space. However, since early stage materials were still relatively sparse, it was more than large enough for preparing concoctions. Two glass cabinets filled with various potions flanked the left side of the room. The delicate crystal bottles contained red, blue, green, and every colour of liquid under the sun. Each bottle had a white label plastered on the side that stated its respective name and price. They were all provided by the Alchemist Guild, but they weren’t free of charge. Upon exiting the workshop, they would have to be paid for along with the rental fee.

In the center of the room was a large rectangular work table with various alchemy wares arranged on top of it.

“When you’re concocting, do you have a hard time focusing?” Nie Yan shot a glance at Bird and asked.

Bird recalled the previous times when he had been concocting. He realized there really was a dark cloud shrouding his mind, causing him to grow increasingly restless. His eagerness to accomplish at least something in Alchemy had negatively influenced his state of mind, which negatively affected his concocting to such an extent that his average success rate was only a mere three tenths of an average Alchemist’s.

“Yes, I think so.”

“It’s best to have a tranquil state of mind before you begin concocting. Shut everything else out and devote your heart to Alchemy. Only then will your success rate reach sixty percent, the standard for the average Alchemist. At the same time, the quality of your tools and wares also influence the success rate of your concoctions, where the highest quality ones will even increase it up to ninety percent. Starting from now, erase any distracting thoughts from your mind and focus solely on concocting. Go ahead and give it a try,” Nie Yan instructed. Although there were no high-level Alchemists yet who could impart their experiences upon Bird, Nie Yan had the benefit of coming from the future. His advice was the accumulated experiences of the Alchemists from his timeline, and he wouldn’t be shy in using this knowledge.

Nie Yan placed several portions of alchemy materials on the table.

“Yes!” Bird nodded his head, picked up a portion, and began processing the materials while taking Nie Yan’s advice to heart.

Perhaps it was because Nie Yan was standing right beside him, but Bird felt a little nervous as his handling of the materials became clumsy.

This is the Alchemy King from my past life...? Nie Yan wrinkled his brows. This doesn’t make sense! There’s no doubt the Alchemy King was named Bird Leaves No Eggs! On second thought... I guess

this should be normal. No one becomes the Alchemy King overnight. He probably put in a lot of effort to reach that level.

“Doing any activity requires an absolutely calm mind. Don’t let outside matters distract you. If you’re going to be this clumsy every time you concoct in front of me, then you might as well beat it. Stop making a fool of yourself,” Nie Yan harshly chided, not holding back in the least. He had given Bird a chance; it was now up to him to firmly grasp it. If Bird still didn’t show signs of improvement, there was nothing left for him to do but boot him out of the door. No matter how much money he had in excess, he wasn’t willing to waste it on a useless Alchemist.

Bird felt like his heart was being stabbed upon hearing these words. Did Nie Yan have any reason to keep providing him materials to practice Alchemy? Definitely not! If he really did continue on this path of incompetence, just like the Dark Hero guild, Nie Yan would kick him to the curb without the slightest hesitation. Even if Nie Yan didn’t shoo him away, he wouldn’t have the face to stay. In fact, these sort of opportunities were exceedingly rare and he wasn’t about to let it go to waste!

Taking in a deep breath, Bird slowly calmed his mind and focused all of his attention on the potion bottle in his hands. As the medicinal liquid inside the bottle gently swayed back and forth a rich colour began to emerge. Seeing this, he tensed up while proceeding to the next step, which caused the colour to immediately fade.

「System: Concocting has failed...」

I still failed... Bird didn't raise his head to gauge Nie Yan's reaction. Instead, he absentmindedly stared at the work table that had ten more portions of alchemy materials set on top of it. There were only ten more chances left... If he didn't manage to improve his success rate while concocting, then after using up these ten portions of materials, he would probably beat it even if he wasn't being forced to leave.

If I fail this time around, then I'm probably just not meant to be an Alchemist. Maybe I should delete this character and start over and pick a combat profession.

Upon reaching this line of thought, Bird picked up the next portion of alchemy materials. He had nothing to lose, and only everything to gain.

"Hold the neck of the bottle and rotate at a uniform speed. You don't need to exert too much strength..." Nie Yan had never practiced Alchemy, so he could only rely on the obtained information from his previous timeline.

Bird understood that this was his last chance and finally managed to solely focus on concocting. He was completely absorbed in swaying the bottle in his hand back and forth.

「System: You have successfully concocted a Basic Anti-Paralysis Potion!」

I actually succeeded! Bird trembled in excitement as he breathed a sigh of relief. The immense pressure he had felt was somewhat

alleviated by this timely success, and he confidently proceeded with the next portion.

He seemed to tune out every extraneous thought from his mind, including Nie Yan's presence. Staring fixedly at the potion bottle in front of him, he gradually completed each successive step. The focused expression on Bird's face even surprised Nie Yan, whereupon he was finally convinced that this individual was indeed the famous Alchemy King from his previous timeline.

Bird produced several more potions, his success rate improving to about fifty percent. Although this was still slightly lower than the average Alchemist, it was still a large step forward for him.

It seemed he had finally found his path in Alchemy.

After finally getting a foothold on his path, becoming the Alchemy King was only a question of time. Nie Yan quietly left the workshop as he allowed Bird to focus on his concocting. Naturally, the latter was too immersed to notice his departure.

After there were no more Alchemy materials left for him to use, he proudly looked at the five potions he had concocted. This accomplishment left him wild with joy. When he turned around to seek Nie Yan's reaction, he found that the latter had already left his workshop.

「Boss, I produced five potions!」Bird excitedly messaged Nie Yan. He already desired to master the state of mind his benefactor had taught him. His previous failures had caused him to be on the

brink of despair, but right now, he was finally able to see a dim light at the end of the tunnel.

「Alright, not bad. It's still only fifty percent though. You've still got much more room for improvement, so keep practicing,」Nie Yan replied. Regardless of what profession, after one was given a foothold on the right path, the heights they reached would solely depend on their effort and talent.

「Yes, I understand!」Bird said in a happy tone. His latest improvements had already exceeded his wildest imaginations. Previously, he would be content if he was able to succeed at least twice out of eleven tries. So long as Nie Yan didn't fire him prematurely, he firmly believed that he could gradually improve his concoction rate.

「I'm heading to the auction house to purchase some more Alchemy materials. I'll send them over to you through the mail. Hurry up and rank up to a Junior Alchemist. As for the higher quality concoctions, don't sell them just yet. I'm planning to open up a potion shop. When the time comes, you'll be acting as the manager.」Nie Yan said. Now that he owned so many properties, opening one or two shops would only be the next logical step. Moreover, since his plots were currently located in undesirable locations, the price of opening and upgrading them would be relatively cheap. He estimated that it would only take two or three gold to upgrade one of them to a first class shop. If he was to wait for these slums to turn into a flourishing commercial hub, then the upgrade expenses would have already risen to an astronomical degree. For now, his objective was to turn one of these plots into a first class potion shop.

「A shop manager, me...!?」Bird emotionally asked. Owning his own shop had always been a dream of his, but he had never had the funds to realize this. Therefore it was never more than a fleeting dream. He would no longer have to worry about money as the manager of a potion shop, because his daily wages would surely not be low.

「Right, so keep practicing. I won't mistreat those who are under me.」

「Yes, I'll definitely give it my all!」Presently, Bird was in a indescribable mood. Just recently, he was all too ready to abandon everything and give up. Who knew that the answer to his problems would come to him in such a timely manner. As if the dark clouds had parted to reveal the evening moon in all its splendor, everything had suddenly become crystal clear. He took a deep breath and tried to suppress his excitement, but he couldn't prevent his hands from shaking.

「System: Concocting has failed...」

“Dammit!”

...

Nie Yan pondered for a moment. Since he decided to open up a potion shop, he was no longer in a rush to get rid of his Black Phenol. Instead, he would use it to increase the popularity of his soon to be opened shop!

If he sold the Black Phenol that everyone was going crazy over in his shop, just how much would its popularity increase?

One could only imagine the popularity his shop would garner by selling Black Phenol, an item that everyone was frantically fighting over in the marketplace.

Thinking to this point, Nie Yan had drawn up a plan. He headed over to the auction house and bought ten silvers worth of alchemy materials before sending them to Bird over the mail, alleviating his possible worries of running out of his supply and allowing him to solely concentrate on his Alchemy. He then sold off some of his Black Phenol and the materials required to craft Black Phenol, earning him three gold. Afterwards, he headed to the eastern region of the city to inspect the several properties that he had purchased.

Presently, Calore's eastern district was still a slum. The NPCs that roamed this area all wore tattered and worn-out clothing, while on either side of the streets the shabby wooden homes seemed to be teetering on collapse.

From its current appearance it seemed like a bad joke to think that such a ghetto would transform into the largest area of commerce in Calore.

Nie Yan had purchased every property in this vicinity that was in a prime location for the sake of helping his father's future business. In his original timeline these properties belonged to Cao Xu, but this time around with Nie Yan's intervention, that 'business legend' would simply have to scram and look elsewhere!

According to his knowledge of the future, the best place to open up the potion shop was near a certain intersection. He quickly approached the most suitable property out of the twelve he owned.

「System: Are you certain you wish to upgrade the property? The current upgrade will cost 2 gold.」

Yes!

「System: The property has been successfully upgraded.」

A building arose from the ground on the plot Nie Yan selected. It was a one-story building constructed out of white marble bricks, which made for a detailed and aesthetically pleasing view. Inside, there was a countertop and rows upon rows of shelves. There were even exquisite runic carvings on the corners, bringing about a strong feeling of the Viridian Empire into the atmosphere.

「System: Do you wish to hire an assistant?」

Nie Yan glimpsed at the list of possible employees. Rows upon rows of names were spread over numerous pages, and on every single page was the information of the NPC, the cost of hire, and other related things, all available for reference.

NPC employees could represent the player to manage the store and they could be entrusted with selling goods. However, they could only sell merchandise by the preset prices given by the

owner of the store. They could not make their own decisions, as their intelligence was not programmed to do as such.

Name: Carady

Gender: Male

Age: 30

Trust: 30

Ability: Quick Run

Employment Cost: 20 silver/month

Name: Tesla

Gender: Male

Age: 26

Trust: 28

Ability: Increased Strength

Employment Cost: 18 silver/month

...

Nie Yan kept on flipping through the list as he continued his search for someone suitable. All of them varied in their odd abilities: some had Speed-related abilities, some had Intelligence-related abilities, some had Power-related abilities... With the difference in ability also came a difference in price.

What was the name of that employee at the Golden Age Potion Shop again? Hmm... Nie Yan's impression of that NPC was a bit hazy. It was a cripple, I remember that. His name was... Rais?

Nie Yan continued scrolling down the list, and finally when he flipped to the latter parts of the list, he noticed a familiar name.

Name: Insei Rais the Cripple

Gender: Male

Age: 56

Trust: 37

Ability: ???

Employment Cost: 50 silver/month

I remember! It's him! Although the cost leaned on the expensive side, there was no hesitation in his mind as he confirmed his decision.

An NPC employee that possessed an unknown ability—and was even a cripple!—costed fifty silvers a month. There was clearly something odd going on. From his previous timeline, he remembered that the Golden Age Potion Shop had always kept an air of mysteriousness around this cripple. However, someone still managed to dig out his ability: it was the Diplomacy ability, something which was very rarely found. It was an ability that allowed him to hold smooth communications with all NPCs, and even made them build up favourable impressions towards him!

Chapter 115 – Chapter Of Freedom

Having paid the employment fees, Nie Yan noticed a crippled old man slowly walking in his direction.

The moment this old man entered his vision, he heaved a sigh of relief as this was indeed him!

“Milord, I am Insei Rais. My family and I would like to express our deepest gratitude for employing my humble self.” Wrinkles covered his face, and his skin was as withered as an old tree bark. In addition to his crippled leg, it was quite difficult to praise him in any way.

Insei Rais has family members? Hmm, now that I think about it... that actually makes sense.

“This is the store I’ll be handing over to you. I’ll also inform you on how to manage this business.” Nie Yan greeted Insei Rais with a small nod, while he contemplated on how to get the most out of this cripple’s Diplomacy Skill. For now, I’ll just have him look after the shop. It’s not like I would have to worry about him stealing merchandise or embezzling money with his thirty-seven Trust... After all, an employee’s loyalty is almost guaranteed when their Trust is thirty or over.

While preparing the store for business, Nie Yan instructed Bird to bring the completed Black Phenol over so that it could be sold. He also made a recruitment poster which read: “Hiring Alchemists! Those interested contact XXX.” If he wanted the shop to prosper,

relying on the future Alchemy King alone was insufficient. He would only be satisfied when he had a large number of Alchemists under his command.

Hmm, what should I name this store...? I'll just call it Starry Night Potion Shop. Nothing too special, while fairly easy to remember.

He instructed Insei Rais to sell the Black Phenol, the recipes, and the raw materials. In addition, to prevent his identity from being known, he hid his name as the shop's owner.

The price of a portion of raw materials was set to twenty coppers, a single bottle of Black Phenol was set to sixty coppers, and a single Black Phenol Recipe was set to thirty silvers. These prices were far above the market price, especially the price of the recipe, which he made ridiculously expensive. Nie Yan planned to start off with these absurd prices, giving the large guilds an opportunity to be the first to buy them. Of course, if they felt that these prices were too high, they were free to go elsewhere. The price of Black Phenol was not going to drop anytime soon, and considering the necessity of this item to progress in the game, there were bound to be people who would buy them. As such, he planned to rob as many people of their money as possible, while the demand still far exceeded the supply, before he would slowly lower the price when the market began to stabilize. Obviously, even at this lower price, he would still make a decent profit.

With everything set up, he inspected the shop. It's still pretty empty, huh. I really need more goods to fill the place up for it to become a genuine business.

The quality of the average Alchemist in Conviction was simply too low at present. Even if he hired a few, they mostly likely wouldn't meet his standards. Therefore, there was no need to hastily start a large-scale recruitment campaign since other shops were likely in the same predicament. Having such thoughts going through his mind, he prepared to leave the shop.

“Eh? Since when was there a potion shop here?” Three players discovered Nie Yan's shop as they passed by the area. After all, how could they not notice it when such a fine, brand-new building suddenly emerged within these slums?

“Let's go have a look.”

The three players headed over to the store, and at the same moment, they noticed Nie Yan walking out.

“Hey! When did this shop open up?” The person who greeted him was a Warrior named Dauntless. He was a very strapping young man who stood at six foot three and had quite a terrifyingly loud and coarse voice.

Nie Yan glanced at Dauntless and said with a faint smile, “I just happened to pass by as well and went in for a look. I have no idea when it opened.”

“I see, thanks anyway. Tuo Ba, let's take a look inside and see if they have any health or mana potions for sale.”

“It doesn’t look like there’s any,” Nie Yan said quite straightforwardly. After all, the shop had barely opened.

“I doubt a new shop would have many things in stock,” another voice rang out, though this one sounded a bit lethargic.

Nie Yan glimpsed at the youth behind Dauntless—a Paladin. The word handsome could be used to describe him, but there was just a tinge of inattentiveness to his appearance and even a bit of laziness. Tuo Ba... this name sounds a bit familiar. However, Nie Yan failed to recognize him and thus walked away, brushing past their shoulders on his way out.

“There aren’t even any basic potions? Why even open a potion store then, not to mention at such a remote place! I’m guessing business must be very poor,” the Arcane Mage noted.

Nevertheless, Dauntless and the other two walked into the store.

“Shit, they’re selling Black Phenol and even the recipe too!”

“The hell? What a rip-off! These prices are absolutely ridiculous!”

Dauntless’ coarse voice erupted behind Nie Yan the moment he had stepped out onto the street. None of them could have ever imagined a place like this would be selling Black Phenol and even its recipe. Items that were selling like hotcakes—items that every

single guild yearned for. From this alone, they understood that this shop wasn't owned by some simpleton.

Nie Yan stopped dead in his tracks when that coarse voice burst into his ears, but after making a faint smile, he walked wherever his feet led him. Since this shop had already been discovered, it was inevitable that this news would spread far and wide. When the guilds that thirsted for Black Phenol learned of this information, they were certain to head over and check it out for themselves. If they were in urgent need of Black Phenol, perhaps they would even buy a few in spite of the outrageous prices.

Black Phenol was already an extreme rarity in the marketplace, let alone the recipe. There was an undeniable truth that many were interested in those two things alone.

「Nie Yan, where are you right now?」Tang Yao messaged Nie Yan.

「I'm in Calore. How's the levelling going with Yu Lan (Blue Feather) and the rest?」

「I'm Level 6, 56%, more than halfway to Level 7! How is it? Pretty impressive, eh?」Tang Yao proudly told him. His skill in casting spells was getting increasingly proficient, and in addition to the fact that Nie Yan provided them with several coordinates, representing places suitable for grinding in the early stages of the game, their levels were rising at quite a fast rate.

Though if Nie Yan were to tell Tang Yao that he was already Level 9, who knew how the latter would react.

「Not too bad,」Nie Yan said, nodding his head. This speed of levelling was already top-tier, outclassed only by the elite players killing Werewolves in Sosil Valley.

「I ran into Chen Bo again. That guy spat nothing but bullshit and even wanted to duel me! In the end, I one-shotted him with my Flame Explosion. Hmph, he was trying to convince Yu Lan and Yao Yao to kick me out of the team... That guy needs to take a good look in the mirror and see who the real loser is! Not a single person in the team paid any attention to him, and even Plain Boiled Water stood by my side. Eventually, Chen Bo couldn't take the shame and left the team himself.」Nie Yan could feel the joy and happiness in Tang Yao's words.

Without a doubt, Tang Yao definitely felt very smug about killing Chen Bo who subsequently left the team voluntarily.

Tang Yao's Fire Chaser set increased all damage related to fire element magic. At present, Tang Yao's damage surpassed most elite fire-spec Elementalists. Judging from the set of equipment Chen Bo wore, it was impossible that he could survive a single blast from Tang Yao's Flame Explosion. As a Thief, Chen Bo was a complete failure for allowing a Mage to successfully cast Flame Explosion in a player versus player situation. If it were Nie Yan instead, Tang Yao would have had no chance of firing off any spells that had over a second of cast time.

「You should remain careful. Chen Bo's the sort who remembers any and all grudges. I'm absolutely certain he'll want to take revenge for this and mess with you in one way or the other.」The

possibility of Chen Bo finding some people to deal with Tang Yao worried him. After all, he knew Chen Bo was not a particularly magnanimous person.

「You think I'm afraid of him? If he comes a few more times, then I'll just beat him up a few more times!」Tang Yao was very confident in his current strength. He had always been someone who'd face matters like these directly. Even though Nie Yan had given him a reminder, it was unlikely that he would take this advice to heart.

Recalling the incident at the bar that one evening in the previous timeline, Nie Yan felt a lump rise into his throat. Brother, if there is anyone who dares to harm you in this life, I will have him pay twice—no, ten times the price! No matter the situation or location!

Nie Yan took a deep breath to calm himself down, and as he did so, he felt the lump in his throat slowly sink back down.

「It never hurts to be a bit more careful.」

「Yeah, yeah. Do you want to come and level with us? Even the beauties here already miss you!」

「I still need to get a few things done. Go on ahead without me. Besides, levelling with you guys is too slow for me anyway,」Nie Yan said nonchalantly.

「Eh... What level are you now?」Tang Yao was momentarily

stunned; he recalled that he hadn't asked about Nie Yan's level in quite some time.

「I'm a bit past Level 9. Don't tell anyone though, I don't want to attract too much attention,」To Tang Yao, who he treated as a genuine brother, he didn't feel the need to conceal the truth.

「Holy crap, already!? How did you level that fast!?!」

「After I finish what I'm doing, I'll take you out to level,」Nie Yan said. He still had to get his hands on that chapter from the Book of Order. Only after doing so would he bring Tang Yao with him. He knew of many ways for Mages to gain tons of experience, allowing Tang Yao's level to soar up alongside his own.

「Then it's decided!」Tang Yao said with a tone of clear excitement. I wonder how Nie Yan did it. That speed is insane!

They continued chatting a while longer before Nie Yan hung up. Meanwhile, he had prepared a few consumables and was now headed for the transfer point.

Carefully weighing the difficulties of acquiring the various chapters from the Book of Order as well as the properties and effects of each and every chapter, Nie Yan decided on one: the sixth chapter from the Book of Order, the Chapter of Freedom! When compared to the Chapter of Courage, the Chapter of Freedom was much more suitable for a Thief.

Nie Yan arrived at the transfer point and selected his destination.

「System: Are you certain you wish to teleport to Hems, Dead Field Gate. Since this is a special transfer, there will be an additional fee of 20 silver.」

Yes!

Nie Yan pressed confirm, and when he reopened his eyes, what entered his vision was a vast field of desolation. The dark skies gloomed; the chilly winds whistled. This was a bleak place without even the most miniscule signs of life. Some destroyed remnants of war machinery were semi-buried within the sands, as though speaking of their distant past. This was a former battleground from the ancient era; however, any turmoil had long since been silenced, and now, this was an untouched field holding nothing but death.

On the map of the Atlanta continent, Hems was located to the north of the Viridian Empire, and it was rumoured that an entrance to an underground city was located there. On the side of the overworld, there were a group of large angels guarding the entrance. If one were to pass through that entrance and enter the underworld, there would be a group of demons awaiting them. They acted as the seals that separated the two worlds. Millions of lives had been lost on these battle-ridden fields during the Era of Shared Governance.

Hems, Dead Gate Field, was a place of legends. In his previous life, when the game developers announced the Chapter of Freedom was located in some place within Hems, the players went into an

uproar. There was simply no end to the teams entering and simply no end to the player deaths that occurred. This place became a true field of death.

There were a total of six chapters in the first volume of the Book of Order. If players were unable to find them within the first three months after the game's release, the game developers would announce their whereabouts. Information regarding the following volume would only be disclosed after all chapters of the first volume were found.

Due to this impending reveal, Nie Yan was forced to obtain all chapters within this three-month time period. If he were unable to collect them before the deadline, he'd have no choice but to compete with the other players over the remaining chapters of the Book of Order.

No matter what happens, I'll decide after obtaining the Chapter of Freedom first, Nie Yan thought.

Chapter 116 – Arcane Fairy

Although Nie Yan's knowledge of the game far exceeded that of any other player in the present, even a glutton wouldn't be able to consume a large meal in one bite. He needed to gather the best equipment, piece by piece, and gradually grow his personal strength. Only then would he be able to widen the gap between himself and other players.

Therefore, these several chapters from the Book of Order were an absolute necessity to accomplish his plans!

The vast region of barren land he had arrived in was encircled by a barrier, deeming it a safe zone in Hems. To reach the area populated by monsters, he would still have to walk quite a distance.

For his plan he could only rely on his intuition and vague memory of the surrounding landmarks to guide him in the proper direction. After he ventured past the first layer of the barrier, a giant silhouette appeared in his vision near the horizon as it lumbered around the expanse that was Hems Wasteland.

[Skeleton Kodo!](#)

Hems was home to several types of monsters, and Skeleton Kodos were one of them. They were the remnant spirits of war mounts that had fallen in battle. Reanimated as undead, they wandered these wastelands eternally.

Over three hundred Skeleton Kodos dotted the entire region of Hems. Even if all of them were put to rest, they would simply respawn the next day. These Skeleton Kodos were relatively slow to respawn, but their drops were excellent. If the player was lucky, they might even be able to obtain a Skeleton Kodo Saddle.

When the game developers eventually announced the whereabouts of the Chapter of Freedom, countless teams and guilds had rushed to Hems Wasteland in a bid to be the first to retrieve it. With the sudden influx of players, it became difficult to fight a monster without having the drops stolen. As a result, deaths due to fighting over a single monster were rather frequent.

Nie Yan activated Stealth before gradually making his way toward the Skeleton Kodo, and after drawing close enough, inspected it with Transcendent Insight.

Skeleton Kodo (Leader): Level 23

Health: 1,600/1,600

A Leader-class Skeleton Kodo... at his current level, provoking it would undoubtedly be an unwise decision. Although Undead Rite had a probability of controlling an undead monster, if the skill failed, he would draw the aggro of the targeted monster. It was especially dangerous because these Skeleton Kodos were quite fast when they wanted to be. In addition to the disparity in level, there was no way he would be able to escape.

He needed to formulate a plan if he wanted to take control of a Skeleton Kodo, and the first step would be finding a suitable meat

shield.

If I recall correctly, there should be some lower level undead to the east. I'll head there first before deciding what to do.

Nie Yan slowly retreated from the area. Only after leaving the Skeleton Kodo's field of vision did he dare to break his stealth and sprint off towards the east.

About three minutes later, he spotted a few lower level undead. They wielded rusty battle axes and wooden shields as they aimlessly wandered around the barren field.

Skeleton Soldier: Level 15

Health: 800/800

Although Concussive Blow might not be effective against these Skeleton Soldiers, with his current stats, he would still be able to handle them with ease.

He activated Stealth, approached one of the Skeleton Soldiers from the rear, and then opened with Assassinate.

-128

A damage value appeared above the Skeleton Soldier's head before slowly drifting up and fading away.

Wielding Blood Pact +7 and Assassin's Decree +2, Nie Yan's damage saw significant improvements. Even though he was six levels lower than the Skeleton Soldier, he was still able to easily penetrate through its defenses.

Upon being struck, the Skeleton Soldier turned around while simultaneously cleaving at its aggressor with the ancient battle axe in its left hand.

Nie Yan sidestepped to avoid the attack and countered with a slash followed by a stab.

-109

-112

He quickly depleted the Skeleton Soldier's life until about sixty health remained, whereupon he disengaged from the melee.

Undead Rite!

「System: Undead Rite has failed!」

As the Skeleton Soldier charged toward him, he activated Swift Retreat and continued to pull back.

Undead Rite!

「System: Undead Rite has failed!」

With only forty percent of his health remaining, he cast Undead Rite once more but failed on the third attempt as well. No longer having the health to cast this skill again, he dashed back into melee range and felled the Skeleton Soldier with one final blow.

He received seven hundred experience for his efforts as the Skeleton Soldier collapsed into a pile of dust. Afterward, he found a safe area to sit down and replenish his health by eating Barley Bread. When he was fully recovered, he stood up and began to seek out his next target.

Nie Yan repeated these actions until eventually, while fighting the third Skeleton Soldier, the crisp sound of the system prompt echoed after he had cast Undead Rite.

Finally... I succeeded! Nie Yan examined his new undead servant. Just like with Dark Gladiator in the Ancient City of Sulgata, the Skeleton Soldier's appearance transformed into a shade of deep, metallic black. Of course, he was now also able to control its actions and movements!

「System: Set a name for your new servant.」

Without putting much thought into it, he named it Soldier #1.

Having obtained his first Skeleton Soldier, the following ones would become much easier. After all, by making Soldier #1 act as a

meat shield, he was able to safely cast Undead Rite from the rear. Then, if he still failed to control the undead after three attempts, he would simply order Soldier #1 to finish it off before moving on to the next target.

Finally, he managed to successfully take control of three more Skeleton Soldiers, which he respectively named Soldier #2, Soldier #3, and Soldier #4. After growing accustomed to their movements by having them kill some of the mobs in the area, he began to lead them back to the area inhabited by the Skeleton Kodos.

Several minutes later, he could see a Skeleton Kodo in the distance. In comparison to it, his Skeleton Soldiers seemed tiny and pathetically frail.

After thinking for a moment, Nie Yan ordered Soldier #2 to approach the Kodo. Its sole purpose was to simply play the role of bait.

Upon discovering an unfamiliar undead encroaching on its territory, the Kodo let out a deep, muffled roar and began pawing the ground with its forefeet while puffing out breaths of hot air.

The literally brainless Soldier #2 had no concept of fear and gradually closed in on its target. In the meantime, Nie Yan entered stealth and slowly circled behind the Kodo.

Once in position, he ordered Soldier #2 to charge toward it.

「Bang!」Soldier #2 rushed up and struck the Kodo with its battle axe.

-32

With a furious roar, it puffed more breaths of hot air before striking the Skeleton Soldier with the sharp horn on its head.

-356

A terrifyingly high damage value appeared above the Skeleton Soldier's head before slowly drifting up and fading away.

Nie Yan was alarmed. The Skeleton Kodo's attack was far too frightening. His Skeleton Soldiers would only be able to take three hits each at most!

He neared the Kodo and cast Undead Rite, whereupon a queer energy struck the creature, halting its movements. However, an instant later, the Kodo rammed into the Skeleton Soldier once more and sent it flying back.

「System: Undead Rite has failed!」

Seeing Undead Rite fail, Nie Yan didn't dare to stick around any longer. He activated Swift Retreat and hastily fled from the Kodo's line of sight while it was still preoccupied with the Skeleton Soldier.

Soldier #2 soon returned to the earth as it was beaten senseless like a ragdoll under the relentless assault of the Kodo.

He waited for Undead Rite to come off cooldown before making his second attempt by sending Soldier #3 toward the Kodo.

Following the death of Soldier #4, he still wasn't able to successfully control the Skeleton Kodo. For lack of a better option, he brought Soldier #1 with him as he once more headed to the east. There, he would gather another four Skeleton Soldiers before returning.

So long as he kept at least one Skeleton Soldier alive, recruiting more with Undead Rite wouldn't be too difficult. Nonetheless, doing it this way was still a huge waste of time. And so, after countless attempts, all of which resulted in failure, a full day had passed.

Once the servers shut down, Nie Yan took off his game helmet.

Although he had some free time on his hands before the servers reopened, Tang Yao had been dragged out by his father to do hard labour and the rest of his good friends from school were all in other parts of the country. Besides, his hometown was indeed a damnable place, definitely not somewhere a person would want to live. The environment wasn't good, and the public security was a mess. If anyone had a little money, they'd definitely buy a house somewhere else and move out.

Thus, Nie Yan stayed home all day exercising and studying. Such a routine was also pretty satisfying. At certain times during the day he would think of his father and mother. He was also looking forward to starting his final year of high school, which was just around the corner.

Like this, the day quickly passed and 5:00 pm soon arrived. He placed the game helmet back on his head and continued off where he had stopped on the previous day.

After an hour or so, he eventually gathered another party of Skeleton Soldiers and set off towards the Skeleton Kodos again. Getting just one of those Skeleton Kodos under his control was extremely crucial to the success of his plan.

「Nie Yan, how are things on your side? Did you get what you needed to do done?」Tang Yao messaged.

「No, not yet. I encountered some trouble.」

「Ah... Anyway, when you get back, send me a message. Also, try and guess what I just found? Hehe...」Tang Yao giggled mischievously, almost unable to hold back his excitement.

「What? What did you get?」

「An Arcane Soul Crystal...」

「Really, what rank!?!」Nie Yan asked in surprise. He even

managed to pick up an Arcane Soul Crystal? First the Meteor spell and now this, just how lucky can he get? Very few items were capable of holding his attention this early in the game. The only ones he cared for were the chapters from the Book of Order, the Featherfall Jewel, the Silk Spinner Ring, the Crawler Ring, and Sulgata's Shadow. As for an Arcane Soul Crystal, it was a top quality item for Arcane Mages and not an ordinary one at that!

They existed in the form of a crystal and only dropped from Arcane Fairy monsters. However, the chances of this item dropping was frighteningly low. Though, on the off chance an Arcane Mage obtained one, they could use it as a catalyst to beckon an Arcane Fairy to their side. The fairy was the same as a summon. Its health was proportionate to the summoner's, its defenses were slightly lower, and it was incapable of attacking. Another downside was that the crystal was a one-time use item, and if the summon died, it would be gone forever. Even then, these fairies were still extremely useful since they were able to significantly improve an Arcane Mage's mana recovery rate and shorten both cooldowns and cast times. Naturally, the higher rank the Arcane Fairy, the more valuable it was.

An Arcane Fairy was a great boon to any Arcane Mage lucky enough to obtain it. In the future, numerous top class Arcane Mages would compare their fairies to see who was better. Having an Arcane Fairy following by one's side was certainly a matter to be proud of. Attributing to the fact that these fairies would disappear forever once they were killed, they became even more valued by Arcane Mages.

「It's rank one. You know what it's used for?」Tang Yao asked in a surprised manner.

「I found some information about it in the library,」Nie Yan replied.

「Ah, I see. It seems I should pay a visit to the library to check as well.」

「Be careful, once you summon the fairy, don't let it die. If you can raise it to rank three, it'll become even more valuable. If you can get it to rank five, then it'll be priceless,」Nie Yan cautioned. Higher ranked Arcane Fairies would give Arcane Mages better bonuses. However, since they were so fragile, very few players were able to raise their fairies to rank three, let alone rank five. He had only ever seen a rank five Arcane Fairy once during his ten years of playing the game. At that time, he was killing monsters in the wilderness when he ran into a Level 135 Great Arcanist. The two of them got into a scuffle, and even though he was a level 165 Great Thief, he ended up being beaten like a dog, narrowly escaping with his tail tucked between his legs. Foolishly, he had underestimated the abilities of an Arcane Mage with a rank five Arcane Fairy as he had thought that the level discrepancy would pull the fight in his favour. That Great Arcanist was basically a machine gun that fired magic as he recklessly shot spells everywhere, seemingly losing no mana in the process. It was simply too terrifying.

「Just don't end up getting killed. Wait for me to finish things on my side, then I'll help you raise your Arcane Fairy's rank,」Nie Yan said. If they had a rank two Arcane Fairy, levelling would become much easier.

「No problem! Hurry up already!」Tang Yao broke into a fit of excitement after hearing Nie Yan's words and couldn't help but become a little impatient.

Chapter 117 – Skeleton Kodo

After numerous attempts and losing several dozen Skeleton Soldiers, Nie Yan had still not managed to succeed.

It seemed Undead Rite's success rate was also influenced by the level discrepancy between the caster and target. Wracking his brain to no avail, he finally decided to check the game's official website to see if there was any information regarding this skill. Surprisingly, he did find something, which was quite a rare occurrence. According to the information there, Undead Rite had a twenty percent chance of controlling the targeted undead if it was equal to the caster in level. For every level the undead exceeded the caster, the chance of success would fall by one percent. The success rate would further diminish when facing Leaders, Sub-Elites, and so on. In short, if the target surpassed the player by twenty levels or more, the success rate became nil.

Since this was the first time he had come into contact with this type of skill, he wasn't too knowledgeable regarding its intricacies. Apparently checking the official website every once in a while still held some benefits.

He was only Level 9 while the Skeleton Kodo was Level 23, not to mention a Leader-class monster as well, so his low success rate thus far was to be expected.

However, if he was incapable of controlling a Skeleton Kodo, he wouldn't be able to proceed with the next step of his plan.

As time gradually ticked away, Nie Yan grew increasingly impatient. The only consolation was that his experience was steadily rising. Killing the undead in this area also wasn't a bad way to level.

At this point, he had forgotten exactly how many Skeleton Soldiers died as he didn't care to name them anymore. Was it twenty-seven or twenty-eight? Regardless, he ordered one of them to get a Skeleton Kodo's attention while he circled behind to cast Undead Rite.

The Skeleton Soldier gradually approached the Kodo. Once it got in range, the Skeleton Soldier brandished its battle axe and charged forward.

Upon being struck, the Kodo violently lashed out in a rage fueled stupor.

「Bang!」The Skeleton Soldier was knocked flying away.

Taking advantage of this moment, Nie Yan cast Undead Rite!

As per usual, he began backing off after using the spell but halted his retreat when he noticed a change occurring in the Kodo's appearance. Did I succeed? He quickly pulled up the system announcements to check and soon found his answer. I did succeed!

He mentally commanded the Kodo to move, and almost immediately, it trembled and then began lumbering over to him.

“Haha! I finally succeeded!”

Having obtained his first Kodo, he was finally able to move on with the next step of his plan.

Undead Rite’s duration on the Kodo was relatively long, so after thinking for a bit, he decided that he might as well do a bit of levelling.

「Where are you right now?」Nie Yan asked, sending Tang Yao a message.

「I’m levelling with Yu lan (Blue Feather) and the others. Why, what’s up?」Tang Yao responded. Since their first encounter several days ago, he had become much more familiar with Yu Lan and her team, even occasionally running a dungeon or two together with them. Furthermore, thanks to Nie Yan’s guidance, their team’s equipment progressively improved. They were even able to run Fallen Shaman Camp now.

「Return to the city,」Nie Yan said. He could only bring Tang Yao alone and not Yu Lan and the rest.

「Alright, let me say goodbye to them first,」Tang Yao said.

Several minutes later, Tang Yao sent Nie Yan a message:「I’m back in the city. Where are you right now?」

「Head to the transfer point and teleport to Hems, Dead Field Gate. The transfer fee is twenty silver. Do you have enough money?」Nie Yan asked.

「Hems, Dead Field Gate...? Wait, isn't that a Level 20 zone!? Why are you all the way over there?」Tang Yao cried out in alarm. Why was he in a Level 20 map at his level? That was practically suicidal!

「You'll know when you come over!」Nie Yan said.

「Ugh... Alright, fine... give me a minute. I don't have enough money on me right now,」Nie Yan had asked him to come over alone, so it definitely meant this was important. Since he had full trust in his brother, he didn't ask anymore questions.

「If you don't have enough money, I can send someone over to cover the rest」Nie Yan said. If Tang Yao wasn't able to gather up the funds, he could only ask Sleepy Fox to borrow some money.

「No need, I'm only short by a little bit. I'll just ask my father's aide to lend me some.」

「Alright, then hurry up. I'll be waiting.」

Afterwards, Nie Yan sought out another Skeleton Kodo. He still used the same tactic of distracting them with the Skeleton Soldiers while he got into position to cast Undead Rite. If he made Kodo #1 fight, it would make short work of the other Kodo, meaning there wouldn't be any time to cast the skill.

However, without at least several dozen attempts, the probability of him succeeding was very low.

Undead Rite!

Thanks to the Skeleton Soldier drawing its attention away, the Kodo didn't notice him approaching from the rear. After he had used the skill, the Kodo trembled before its bones slowly transformed into a deep metallic black. He successfully took control of another Kodo with Undead Rite.

A feeling of pleasant surprise washed over his mind. Against all expectations, he succeeded. No one could ever be certain when it came to chance; sometimes a person would fail several dozen or even hundreds of times over, but other times, they would prevail after only one or two tries.

And so, Nie Yan obtained his second Skeleton Kodo, which he named Kodo #2. These two Kodos resembled dinosaurs from the ancient past as they possessed thick, sturdy forelimbs, an immense frame, and three sharp horns at the top of their heads, while pale cyan flames flickered in their eye sockets.

With two Kodos at his side, his levelling speed would improve significantly.

「I'm at Hems, where are you?」Tang Yao sent a message asking.

「Stay put, I'll be there in a minute,」Nie Yan replied, bringing the pair of Skeleton Kodos and Skeleton Soldiers with him as he headed over to the transfer point.

After walking for a while, he eventually spotted a short, chubby figure waiting by the transfer point.

“Scary... a-are these your pets?” Tang Yao asked in shock, as he stared at the Skeleton Soldiers and Kodos by Nie Yan's side.

“Yep, follow me. We're going to level.”

“Level 9 already, no wonder your levelling speed is so fast... Also, you scared me half to death when you were bringing those Kodos over! I thought some monsters had roamed into this area, but since these two giant lugheads are on our side, levelling will definitely be much quicker!” Tang Yao exclaimed in excitement.

“It's not bad,” Nie Yan laughed. While Tang Yao made a good guess, his fast levelling speed had nothing to do with these Kodos.

Where's your Arcane Fairy?”

“It's just hiding. It's a little afraid of strangers.”

Only then did he notice a chubby little blue fairy hiding behind Tang Yao's back. It resembled a boy with an adorable face and was surprisingly agile despite its appearance. As it hovered in the air, a faint blue light fluttered and spiralled around its body.

「Blub! Blub!」Occasionally, the fairy blew tiny blue bubbles from its mouth that floated into the air.

As long as an Arcane Mage properly guarded their Arcane Fairy from being killed by other players, they would receive an endless supply of mana. This was especially useful for Arcane Mages who had many high damage spells in their arsenal. They would be able to freely cast these spells without worrying about running out of mana. At the same time, their cooldowns and cast times were significantly reduced, meaning they would be able to cast the same spell again shortly after use.

However, when an Arcane Mage faced other players, their fairy would easily become the priority target of the enemy's attacks. Therefore, raising an Arcane Fairy to rank three was an incredibly difficult task. As for anyone who owned a rank five fairy, it meant the player who raised it was also extremely skilled. For that sort of player to not have any powerful enemies was only natural.

“So, what kind of benefits do you get from a rank one fairy?” Nie Yan asked.

“Mana Recovery Rate +200%, all Cooldowns – 30%, all Cast Time -30%.”

“Wow, that's pretty good.” Truthfully, Nie Yan was also shocked. Indeed, Arcane Fairies were quite overpowered. “From now on, don't get into too many fights with other players. It would be a shame if your fairy ends up dying.”

Tang Yao thought for a moment, then nodded and said, "Alright." He resolved himself in his mind. If he wasn't guaranteed to win in a duel, then he absolutely wouldn't participate. There shouldn't be a problem if he only stepped on relatively unskilled players. Otherwise, he would find it difficult to resist the itch growing in his heart. After all, it would be too much of a tragedy if he wasn't allowed to duel other players after obtaining an Arcane Fairy, an existence that would enable him to dominate others.

Nie Yan revealed a wry smile. He knew his best friend's personality all too well. Even though Tang Yao gave a straightforward reply, his mind was definitely thinking something else. The only way to guarantee that nothing bad would happen in the future was to make him improve as quickly as possible. Once he had the strength to protect himself, then he would be able to escape unscathed even when encountering an expert.

"Let's set off," Nie Yan said as he turned around and led Tang Yao with him back to the previous zone to hunt more Skeleton Kodos. Upon encountering one, he would make his Kodos act as tanks while he used Undead Rite from the rear. If the skill failed, then they would simply finish it off.

「System: You have successfully slain a Skeleton Kodo (Leader). +700% experience for killing a monster above your level. You have received 28,290 experience points.」

Watching his experience bar fill up, Tang Yao was shocked. He was just following Nie Yan and still hadn't done anything, but after Nie Yan ordered Kodo #1 and Kodo #2 to finish off the other Kodo,

his experience bar suddenly shot up from sixty-two percent directly to seventy-three percent.

This levelling speed was really too frightening.

One had to understand, when he was with Yu Lan and her team, he would use Meteor to kill mobs en masse. Yet after over half an hour of grinding, his experience bar would still only fill up by a mere six percent.

“Don’t move too far away from me,” Nie Yan said as he picked up the items that dropped from the Skeleton Kodo and then controlled Kodo #1 and #2 to seek out their next target.

“The levelling here is so fast! What did it drop?”

“A Fortune Gem.”

“Wow, we’re pretty lucky!” A single Fortune Gem was worth around five silver. From Tang Yao’s perspective, this was already quite a large sum of money. Although he didn’t voice it, he was still brooding over the twenty silver he spent to teleport from Calore to Hems. That one trip practically stripped him of all of his savings.

While they ventured forth, Nie Yan suddenly recalled that Tang Yao probably didn’t have much money left. Thankfully, the profits from this trip should more than make up for it.

“Tang Yao, you should be the one collecting all the drops from

now. I'll only take the items that I need, and you can have the rest to sell," Nie Yan said. He wasn't lacking in money; plus, dealing with the tedium of getting rid of equipment was annoying.

"You don't want them?"

"I'm not short on money."

"Well, now that I know you're rich, I guess I won't be shy about taking the drops!" Tang Yao happily exclaimed. They were childhood friends, ones that had grown up together since they were in diapers. If they had to be polite with each other in these circumstances, then they wouldn't be brothers!

After a while, a white radiance enveloped Tang Yao. He had levelled up!.

"Damn! This levelling speed is friggin amazing! It's like I'm riding on a rocket!" Tang Yao glanced at his experience bar. He was already five percent to Level 8 and at this rate he would easily reach Level 9 within two days.

"Have you picked up anything good?"

"A piece of Level 20 Silver equipment, a Paladin skill book, another Fortune Gem, and two silver. I'm not sure how much I can sell the first two for," Tang Yao said after checking.

"Give me the Fortune Gem. You can sell the rest," Nie Yan said

while inspecting the skill book. Surprisingly, it was the skill book for Silence. “You can list this skill book up in the auction house, but don’t sell it for anything less than fifty silver.”

“Wow, it’s that expensive!” Tang Yao exclaimed, then continued, “Hey, I’m fine with splitting the profits from selling the skill book with you.” The Silence skill book was far too valuable in his opinion. Perhaps Nie Yan wouldn’t mind passing on one or two silver, but this was an entire fifty silver!

“No need,” Nie Yan laughed and then continued in an unconcerned tone, “It’s only fifty silver.” That amount wasn’t even enough to pick at the gaps between his teeth.

What did he mean by only fifty silver!? Recently, less than half of that had nearly stripped him of everything he had! Just how much money did this brother of his have!?

Chapter 118 – Sea Of Bones

Nie Yan led the pair of Skeleton Kodos in clearing out to the rest of the monsters in the vicinity. During this, he would also occasionally use Undead Rite in an attempt to recruit more servants. After all, the chances of success might be slim to none, but what harm was there in trying?

Since the Kodos' spawning areas were rather sporadic, Nie Yan had to lead his minions all over the region to hunt them, while steamrolling everything in his path. By the time he had killed ten Kodos, he was able to bring yet another Skeleton Kodo under his control.

Now, with three Kodos, he possessed enough manpower to move on to the next phase of his plan.

Tang Yao was left awed by the sight of these three immense skeletal minions.

“What’s your experience at now?” Nie Yan asked.

“57%,” Tang Yao responded.

“Nice, you’ll be levelling up soon. I’ll stick around for a little while longer, but then I gotta head off and take care of some business. When you reach Level 8, let your Arcane Fairy have all the experience, then I’ll help you evolve it to rank two. Afterwards, I’ll bring you to somewhere you can train on your own.” Raising a fairy from rank one to rank two was fairly easy,

but getting it from rank two to rank three was a hundred times more difficult. From rank three and onwards, the amount of experience required became even more excessive. This was also one of the reasons why Arcane Fairies were so difficult to nurture.

“Sure!” Tang Yao nodded. He wanted to prioritize leveling himself, but since Nie Yan had something else in mind, he decided to simply follow his instructions. Besides, he would have many more opportunities to tag along with Nie Yan in the future. Levelling with his brother was just too exhilarating to miss out on!

“So, where am I going to train?” Tang Yao asked in confusion. After all, with his current stats, attempting to solo grind mobs in this region was practically committing suicide.

“There’s a region to the east where Level 19 Skeleton Soldiers spawn. You should be able to train at that place. Oh, and don’t worry about their levels. You’ll understand what I mean when we get there,” Nie Yan answered.

Tang Yao was still slightly bewildered. Would he really be able to kill Level 19 mobs at his level? However, since Nie Yan said so, it definitely meant he had a plan.

Nie Yan led the Kodos around the zone, clearing out everything in his path. Eventually, a jingling sound rang out and he was enveloped in a brilliant radiance. He had levelled up as well.

Upon reaching Level 10, he opened his character page and saw that he now had seven stat points and two skill points to allocate.

For the sake of being able to equip Sulgata's Boots sooner, he unhesitatingly placed all seven points into Strength.

After allocating his stats, he glanced at his Strength which now amounted to a total of fifty-three. Although it seemed like a far cry from the one hundred and thirty points he'd need to equip Sulgata's Boots, in actuality, it was almost within his reach. Nie Yan did, after all, have many methods of raising his Strength without needing to rely on the stats gained from levelling up, the Chapter of Freedom being one of them. The reason he had set out to retrieve this chapter next was because it increased Strength by a considerable amount. If he were able to equip the restored Shadow of Sulgata, then everything would be perfect.

As for the two skill points, he placed a single point into both Intermediate Marksman and Adept Hands. The former increased a Thief's proficiency with bows and crossbows, which increased ranged damage and provided a one percent armour piercing effect. The latter enabled a Thief to nimbly switch between different stances when using a dagger such as reverse grip, forward grip, and so on. It also increased damage by two percent and provided additional benefits to Steal.

The Steal skill was just a method for a Thief to earn some extra income. For someone such as Nie Yan, who was already filthy rich, it provided little to no benefit when levelling. However, it wasn't entirely useless to him since there were a few quests where it came in extremely handy. These were profession restricted quests, available only to Thieves. The rewards were quite generous as well, even including top quality pieces of equipment that were capable of making most Thieves go green with envy. However,

completing those quests would have to wait until after he retrieves the Chapter of Freedom which would allow him to equip Sulgata's Boots and gain the Steal skill.

Since he received two skill points every five levels instead of only one, thanks to the Chapter of Courage, he wasn't so conscious about where he was allocating them. He would place a point in any skill that he felt would be useful.

Eventually, Tang Yao also levelled up and reached Level 8, whereupon he began diverting one hundred percent of the experience he gained to his Arcane Fairy.

As they set off and hunted more Kodos, the fairy's experience bar began to fill at a frightening pace.

There were very few regions that spawned Undead near Calore. Not to mention that, by the time he reached level 20, 30, and onwards, there would basically be no suitable areas to make use of Undead Rite. Therefore, he had to take advantage of these maps while they were still considered off limits by most players. If Tang Yao nurtured his Arcane Fairy now, then he'd have a much easier time levelling in the future. This would be especially true if he improved his magic attack and learned more high damage-spells, as his damage output would reach unprecedented levels with the aid of his Arcane Fairy, enabling him to dispatch large groups of monsters in a quick and efficient manner.

After leading Tang Yao around killing mobs for almost half an hour, the Arcane Fairy finally evolved. Thankfully, raising a fairy from rank one to rank two was fairly simple. Rank two to rank

three, on the other hand, was much more difficult.

“What are your Arcane Fairy’s properties now?” Nie Yan asked.

“Mana Recovery Rate +300%, Cooldown -40%, Cast Time -40%, Magic Damage +10%, and... Ignore Level Difference +2.” Tang Yao gasped in surprise upon reading out the final property.

“Very good! That’s just the property we needed! With it, you should be able to kill the Level 19 Skeleton Soldiers by yourself,” Nie Yan said. The reason he had been so confident Tang Yao could be left on his own was due to the Ignore Level Difference property.

His plans had long taken even this small detail into consideration.

Afterwards, he and Tang Yao headed to the east. Eventually, they came across a large chain of unbroken sand dunes where hordes of Skeleton Soldiers wandered aimlessly at the base.

“Get on top of one of those dunes. As long as you don’t fall down below, the Skeleton Soldiers won’t be able to attack you,” Nie Yan explained. Since skeleton type monsters were inherently awkward and clumsy, they were more or less incapable of climbing these sand dunes. “Levelling here is much faster than following me. You should be able to grind out a few levels easily, but I still suggest giving all the experience to your Arcane Fairy since it’s that important to your progression right now. I know those skeletons are Level 19 and you’re only level 8, but the amount of experience you’ll gain for killing monsters eleven levels above you will be

incredible. Not to mention, all of it will be going directly to your fairy. So, if you keep grinding, you should be able to evolve it again in just three days.”

Due to the discrepancy between the amount of experience needed for each rank, Arcane Fairies required a slightly different method of gaining experience than players. If Tang Yao were to follow the normal way, even if he were to give all of his experience to the fairy, it would still take at least a month for it to rank up again. Who knew what sort of unforeseen dangers a player might encounter during that time span?

In the previous timeline, a player had used a similar method to train their Arcane Fairy. After an entire month, they were able to evolve their fairy to rank four. Yet, no matter how much they grinded afterwards, they were unable to raise it to rank five. Later, they discovered that after rank four, an Arcane Fairy no longer required experience from monsters, but rather experience obtained by killing players.

However, most Arcane Mages who were able to reach this step would have their fairies slain by an enemy before they could get the required experience. If you walk alongside the shore, how can your feet not get wet? Even powerful experts could be killed when they were ambushed by a group of players.

“You’re right, this place isn’t bad. I’ll hurry up and raise my Arcane Fairy to rank three. That way we’ll be able to level together again!” Tang Yao exclaimed. His fairy already had such amazing properties at rank two. He could hardly imagine how monstrous it would become upon reaching rank three.

Generally, most Arcane Mages would be Level 40–50 or higher before their fairy reached rank three. If one were to emerge in the present, then the player who owned it would be far ahead of the pack and possess an equally astonishing might.

“Go off and level then. You shouldn’t run into any more mana issues since you have your Arcane Fairy with you, especially now that it’s rank two. Just send me a message when you’re about to leave,” Nie Yan said before examining the remaining duration on his Skeleton Kodos. The very first one he took control of, Kodo #1, still had a little under an hour left.

“Alright, no need to worry. I’ll definitely finish the task in three days, but I’ll probably end up sticking around for five, so you don’t need to go looking for me before then,” Tang Yao replied. After getting his fairy to rank three, he wanted to stay here awhile longer to quickly raise his level.

“Your gear is a little behind, but you should be fine since your Arcane Fairy increases your magic damage. Even if you wait until Level 15 to replace your equipment, it still shouldn’t be a problem. Well, I’ll leave you to level then.”

Afterward, Tang Yao made his way up to the top of one of the sand dunes and began bombarding the Skeleton Soldiers below with magic. Although most of the spells in his arsenal were single target, Meteor being the only notable area of effect magic, he was still receiving a considerable amount of experience. This was because he was able to continuously chain spells without worrying about mana!

After leaving Tang Yao, he and his Kodos headed off into the distance.

As his silhouette gradually receded before finally disappearing into the vast horizon, Tang Yao glanced at Nie Yan's back once more, then returned to bombarding the Skeleton Soldiers with magic.

He would have to survive out here on his own for the next three to five days.

"Ahh... what a lonesome life!" Tang Yao sighed to himself. He opened his friends list and began searching for beautiful women to talk with.

「Hey babe, what are you up to?」

「I'm levelling.」

「Wanna chat with me to pass the time?」

「Too busy.」

「W-wait, don't be so quick to brush me off! I'm actually an expert! I'm levelling in a Level 20 zone right now. I'll prove it by bringing you here when I get back!」

「Hah... Like I'd believe you.」The other side abruptly disconnected from the chat.

Tang Yao let out a bitter smile. Why was it that when he spoke the truth, no one would believe him? He pressed the avatar of another beauty and proceeded to bother them. Harassing beauties while levelling, that was the only way he could keep himself amused in this tedious grind. He also found the sound of his fairy blowing bubbles by his side to be quite pleasant to listen to. No matter how he felt, if he wanted to become a genuine expert, he needed to be capable of tolerating long periods of loneliness.

In the meantime, Nie Yan was slowly venturing deeper into Hems Wasteland, a place where strong winds would scatter yellow sand across the barren land. Here, practically no plant could be seen as almost nothing could survive the harsh conditions.

The sky was overcast and blotted with sand, the unchanging scenery easily capable of making a person lose their sense of direction.

Nie Yan checked his coordinates. Although his memories of this location were fuzzy, he felt as though he was going in the right direction.

After ten minutes, Nie Yan finally found a graveyard in the vast barren. Countless tombstones jutted out of the ground, dotting the entire land. It was an endless graveyard that stretched out as far as the eye could see.

This quiet graveyard, which had experienced the passing of numerous ages, stood testament to those who had died.

As he looked a little further, he spotted a ruined building hidden within the yellow sands. It was the entrance that led to the catacombs underground.

Here lay Necromancer Abraham, who led an army of undead from the underworld to invade the Viridian Empire. He was a dreaded figure who controlled death, fear, and disease. After he was smited by an archangel, his body was eternally sealed inside this tomb.

According to legends, a Thief had entered this tomb in an attempt to rob the Necklace of Abraham. However, the Thief failed in his grave robbing attempt and died in the catacombs, leaving behind the Chapter of Freedom.

As Nie Yan drew closer to the catacombs, a dark wave of energy washed over the area. Suddenly, numerous skeletons pried their bony hands out of the sand as they began climbing out of their graves. One turned to tens, then hundreds, then thousands until the entire graveyard was filled with countless skeletons.

The vast graveyard was now dotted with skeletons stretching out as far as the eyes could see, resembling a sea of bones.

In that instant, Nie Yan understood what the term ‘army of skeletons’ truly meant. He was even able to vaguely imagine the spectacular sight of an ancient battlefield.

Chapter 119 – Abraham's Tomb

Abraham's Tomb was almost within reach, yet there was a near-insurmountable barrier in his path.

An endless sea of skeletons stood between Nie Yan and the entrance; there were simply too many.

With Transcendent Insight, he inspected one of the skeletons among the crowd.

Skeleton Warrior: Level 13

Health: 520/520

In the previous timeline, the owner of the Chapter of Freedom was a Thief named Quiet Life. He was the Representative Thief of the Victorious Return guild and one of few players worthy of the title Shadow Dancer. He would earn significant achievements in guild wars, stronghold sieges, and town sieges, killing at least a hundred enemies in every battle, most of which were cloth-armoured professions such as Magi and Divine Priests. Not only that, but he was quite elusive as well, possessing many life-saving skills that enabled him to escape unscathed, despite being completely surrounded, on several occasions.

Shadow Dancer, an honour that all Thieves sought after! Just because someone was high levelled didn't necessarily mean they would obtain this title. In order to advance to one, they were required to go through an incredibly difficult profession advancement quest that pushed their abilities as a Thief to the

limit, and upon passing it, they would receive greatly increased stats and skill rewards.

A Thief that achieved Shadow Dancer was an extremely terrifying existence. They were able to emerge in unpredictable places as they hid among the shadows. Once they took action, it was almost guaranteed to be a certain kill. Although they were unable to do much against their equally powerful Warrior and Paladin counterparts, the other side was helpless in pinning them down as well.

The best counter to a Shadow Dancer was a Priest's Marking Sigil or a Paladin's Divine Eye. Moreover, Magi with high awareness also had a fifty-fifty chance of beating a Shadow Dancer in a duel. Interestingly, they were only able to maintain such a victory rate for none other than the fact that they possessed a ludicrous levelling speed. Often times, when a Magus encountered a Shadow Dancer, the former would hold a level advantage of ten or higher.

Although there was nothing to criticize about Quiet Life's ability, the Chapter of Freedom's contribution could not go ignored when discussing his advancement to Shadow Dancer.

Victorious Return... Nie Yan let out a deep sigh. The sea of enmity he felt towards them was certainly not shallow, and it only increased after they were bought by Cao Xu and subsequently became one of the five major guilds under his control. Those five guilds were Victorious Return, Radiant Sacred Flame, Alliance of Mages, Divine Protectors, and Bloodlust Blades. Each one held so much power that, upon joining forces, they would become unchallenged in the entire server. In the end, no one came even

close to toppling his sovereign-like position in the game. In fact, many guilds were barely able to sustain themselves under Cao Xu's oppression.

Rumours told that the guild leader of Victorious Return and Cao Xu were actually business partners in real life, which meant they would certainly form an alliance in the end. As such, if there was an opportunity to weaken Victorious Return, Nie Yan wouldn't let that chance slip by. Regardless of whether they were going to be purchased by Cao Xu and his overbearing wealth, he would never let down his guard.

He gradually grew more determined as he stared at the vast sea of skeletons up ahead.

I won't allow anyone to stop me on my path to becoming powerful!

He glanced at the Skeleton Kodos beside him. His reasoning for taking control of them was so that they could open up a path for him towards the tomb's entrance. Afterwards, their mission would be complete.

As for the interior of the tomb, long after Victorious Return had removed the Chapter of Freedom, Nie Yan had explored and levelled in this place before. So, he had a general impression of its internal structure. As long as he got inside, he would be able to recall these memories.

Nie Yan ordered his minions to clear a path as he headed toward

the tomb. The Kodos protected his front and both flanks while the Skeleton Fighters protected his rear.

The three Kodos spearheaded the sea of skeletons, pushing aside everything in their path which knocked many Skeleton Warriors away.

Many of the Skeleton Warriors began attacking the Kodos as damage values rose up above their heads.

-12, -12, -12...

As soon as he set foot on this graveyard, it was as if a single rock had set off a wave thousands of stories high. Like a swelling tide, upon sensing the breath of the living, these Skeleton Warriors frantically surged toward him and barred his way forward.

The Kodos pressed on while clearing the path ahead, losing a large chunk of health each time they moved forward. If it weren't for their astonishing health recovery rate, they would have collapsed a long time ago.

At the current pace, however, these Kodos would die long before reaching the tomb's entrance.

This somewhat deviated from his predictions. He had to somehow increase their speed!

Otherwise, he would sink into a sea of skeletons and undoubtedly

meet his demise.

Nie Yan ordered the Kodos to speed up. However, this allowed a Skeleton Warrior to squeeze through their defensive formation. Brandishing the longsword in its hands, the Skeleton Warrior slashed towards him.

He sidestepped the attack and countered with Vital Strike followed by a reverse-grip slash, striking the Skeleton Warrior in the back.

-165

-152

The Skeleton Warrior that had slipped through didn't have much health remaining in the first place, so with his high damage, Nie Yan was able to finish it off in only two attacks.

In this fashion, the Kodos accelerated while he dealt with the skeletons that slipped through the formation.

When he was no more than twenty meters from the entrance, the Skeleton Fighters protecting his rear collapsed. Although relatively few Skeleton Warriors attacked from the rear, their frail defenses were unable to endure the constant assault.

The horde of skeletons unceasingly swelled and surged towards them like the raging waves of the sea while Nie Yan and his Kodos

were like a reef within. They were battered relentlessly, in danger of being engulfed at any time. And yet, when the swells receded, they still remained resolute, towering like monoliths over the surrounding sea of skeletons.

He glanced at the health bars of his Kodos. The highest one had eight hundred remaining while the lowest only had three hundred.

Having received Nie Yan's command, the Kodos fiercely charged into the mob of skeletons, sending Skeleton Warriors flying in every direction.

Numerous Skeleton Warriors fell beneath his feet, meaning many items had dropped as well, but he had only bothered to bend down and pick up one or two that he felt were fairly valuable. As for money and ordinary items, he absolutely wouldn't care about them, nor would he dare to retrieve them.

After all, the longer he dallied in place, the higher the likelihood of his death.

Amidst the intense assault, Nie Yan was now only eight meters from the entrance. With his destination being almost within reach, his heart began to race.

Eventually, one of the Kodos' health bars was close to being depleted as numerous cracks began appearing and spreading on its skeletal frame.「Thud!」The Kodo finally died, and as its bones fell to the ground, it buried four Skeleton Warriors along with it.

One of his Kodos had died!

Nie Yan was greatly alarmed as only two Kodos remained; not only that, but they didn't have much health left either!

He felt an impending sense of doom. If all of his Kodos died, he would lose his final screen of protection. The moment he was engulfed by the sea of skeletons, let alone a complete corpse, not even his bones would remain!

With one less companion, the two Kodos that were already barely holding on were put under even more pressure. Furthermore, the gap left Nie Yan with no other choice but to step up and deal with the wave of Skeleton Warriors surging toward him.

As soon as he killed a Skeleton Warrior with Assassinate, two more emerged and charged at him.

He dodged the first Skeleton Warrior's attack but was unable to evade the second's as it slashed his chest.

-32

In the next moment, five more Skeleton Warriors poured in from the gap and began surrounding him.

There were simply too many skeletons. As he was gradually overwhelmed, his health constantly fell lower and lower. 65%...

37%... Upon falling below fifteen percent, he hastily drank a Health Potion and applied a Combat Bandage.

+20, +20, +20

As he fended off the assault, he shot a glance in the direction of the tomb's entrance. The ruined building stood three meters high. After centuries of erosion by wind and sand, its walls were covered in cracks. In fact, it seemed like it could collapse at any time. The inside of the tomb was hidden in darkness, but he was still able to vaguely make out a flight of stairs leading below where the darkness, as if it were a man-eating beast, awaited its prey with an open maw.

With what little remained of their health, Nie Yan and the two Kodos pressed on. After another three meters, the second Kodo ran out of health, and like the previous one, it let out a muffled groan before collapsing into a pile of bone fragments.

He became even more alarmed as he glanced at the remaining Kodo's health bar. -12, -12, -15... A string of damage values rose up above its head. Under the constant assault of the Skeleton Warriors, it eventually ran out of health as well.

He had lost his final barrier of protection. Soon, an endless sea of Skeleton Warriors swarmed toward him. It seemed he would be engulfed at any moment.

Dammit... I'm running out of time. He helplessly glanced at the tomb which was only a few meters away. Could it be that he was

really going to fail at the final step?

Countless Skeleton Warriors were like frantic beasts as they swarmed toward him. Two of them slashed him with their swords, resulting in his health falling from thirty-seven percent to twenty-one percent.

As he searched for an escape, his eyes happened to land on the beam of the tomb's entrance. Without the slightest delay, he immediately shot out a web line from his Silk Spinner Ring. It flew over the Skeleton Warriors' heads and stuck to the beam. With a hard tug, he was pulled towards the tomb's entrance as his body soared over countless Skeleton Warriors.

While mid-air, he glanced back at his previous position. An instant later, it was engulfed by a surge of Skeleton Warriors.

He quickly approached the tomb's wall. However, just before crashing into it, he held out his right hand and caught hold of the beam. After stabilizing himself, he climbed up on top of it and stared down.

The Skeleton Warriors beneath him grew restless as they constantly stirred around. However, they were incapable of reaching his location which allowed Nie Yan to breath a sigh of relief; he was finally safe. With only a little health remaining, he hastily found a spot to sit before eating some Barley Bread to replenish his health.

Chapter 120 – Grace Of The Civet

Those Skeleton Warriors seemed to have a fear of Abraham's Tomb as they didn't dare to approach it.

Nie Yan sat above the tomb's entrance while his health gradually recovered. Moments later, his low health was once more restored to full.

No longer in danger of dying, his mind felt much more at ease. Turning around, he jumped off the beam, and after a graceful landing, he walked through the entrance before descending down the flight of stairs.

All of the steps had become smooth and flat due to erosion from the elements while their surfaces were covered in the ancient characters of the undead. Down below was an endless darkness where the silence would infinitely magnify even the softest of sounds. The silence was so palpable that he was even able to hear his heartbeat and breathing.

It was almost as if he was walking toward the gates of death.

The sinister smell of death and decay drifted upward from the deepest abyss of the tomb.

Nie Yan's footsteps were light, sticking close to the wall as he made his way down.

Although he had traversed this place once upon a time, by the time he reached this area, it was already long explored by Victorious Return. The difficulty of exploring a new map and the difficulty of exploring a new dungeon was quite comparable in the sense that many Sub-Elites and Elites would emerge. However, with the former, once they were killed, they would never respawn, just like the Skeleton Executioners guarding the pyramid entrance in the Ancient City of Sulgata.

Not to mention, this was a Level 10 player challenging a Level 20 map. Perhaps in the entire server, Nie Yan was the only one who would dare to make such a crazy attempt.

Nonetheless, the Chapter of Freedom's allure was too hard to resist.

Relying on his limited vision, Nie Yan fumbled his way down until he reached the bottom of the stairs where he was able to see a few dim rays shining from up ahead, making his surroundings much brighter as he approached.

Embedded into the walls on either side of him was a line of Night Pearls. The pale, hazy light they emitted added to the gloomy and enigmatic atmosphere of the tomb.

After entering, a sense of nostalgia arose within him as the familiar surroundings began stirring up his old memories. He had come here quite often to level in the past, so he had long explored every part of this place.

Up ahead shadows appeared to dance and flicker about, presumably due to monster activity in the area, sending Nie Yan on high alert. When he explored this place in the past, he had never encountered monsters around here. In fact, the area where monsters spawned was still quite a ways away.

Nie Yan slowly turned illusory until he completely blended into the background. Hidden within the shadows, he inched his way across the wall with his hands guiding him.

Eventually, he came across a wide open room about four hundred square meters in size with a ten meter high ceiling. There were candles everywhere, emitting flickering flames as shadowy figures wandered about.

In this dim lighting, he was finally able to make out the appearance of one of these monsters. It was a pale-skinned figure in a black chang pao, a Vampire! After examining their numbers, he counted over thirty of them, all blocking the path forward.

He activated Transcendent Insight.

Vampire Baron (Elite): Level 25

Health: 3,000/3,000

They were actually Vampire Barons! Nie Yan sucked in a cold breath as he suddenly recalled a certain piece of information. Vampire Barons were the hardest Level 20–30 Elites to deal with. Their health wasn't all that high, but they were incredibly fast and possessed high damage. At the same time, they were also able to

siphon health with their attacks, thus making them very difficult opponents. Even when he was Level 27, he had fallen victim to one of these monsters in another map.

Undead were very sensitive to the breath of the living. If any living being approached within seven or eight meters of them, they would instantly be able to detect that being's exact position.

As such, a Thief's ability to stealth wouldn't be as effective!

There were over thirty of them, and they were all grouped around the passage forward! He had no chance of sneaking past them!

He would already be hard-pressed to deal with a single Vampire Baron, let alone such a large group!

How am I going to get through here? He thought for a moment, then looked up toward the ceiling entirely constructed out of stone. Various ancient designs covered the surface, forming an enormous, dark red maelstrom with a deathly pale skull depicted at its center, in which pale cyan flames calmly flickered in its eye sockets. The piece of artwork left a surreal impression, and as if staring at a god overlooking the world down below, the observer would be unable to look away.

The unidentified skull and the flickering flames made the atmosphere exceptionally mysterious.

As he examined the smoothness of the stone, the corner of Nie Yan's mouth exposed a smile. He activated the Silk Spinner Ring's ability and shot out a web-line which adhered to the wall. Borrowing the tension of the line, he flung himself upward.

While still in mid-air, he activated his Crawler Ring's ability, whereupon both of his hands emitted an attractive force that enabled him to firmly latch on upon making contact with the wall.

Like a spider, he made his way up the wall toward the ceiling and then began crawling to the other side.

He was able to sense the Vampire Barons below him growing restless, presumably because they sensed the breath of the living. However, never would they suspect that he was actually right above them this whole time, and even if they did, they would have no way of attacking him.

He nimbly crawled under the ceiling and eventually neared its center. He was drawing progressively closer to the skull, but when he drew within five meters of it, he felt a strong sense of crisis growing in the back of his mind.

There's something odd about this skull...

After coming to a realization, he immediately came to a halt before making a large detour around the skull.

It's an explosive trap!

His sharp intuition had once again saved his life!

After safely circling around the skull, Nie Yan finally relaxed. If he had accidentally triggered that trap a moment ago, in that sort of circumstance, there would have been no way for him to avoid the explosion in time. He would have been reduced to ground meat!

Thieves had a relatively high chance of avoiding damage even if they stepped onto a trap thanks to their Reflex stat. However, many were extremely deadly. They would instantly kill anyone who triggered them, just like that explosive trap in the skull. Luckily, he had been quite prudent and didn't approach rashly, leaving him enough time to sense the peculiar energy contained inside of it. If he had actually triggered the trap, then the result would have been obvious.

He slowly made his way forward for ten minutes until he was more than twenty meters away from the closest Vampire Baron. Then, he let go of the ceiling and fell back to the floor.

After safely passing through this dangerous region without any mishaps, Nie Yan proceeded deeper into the tomb.

Although the lighting inside the tomb was very dim, he was already very familiar with the path he was walking through. Occasionally, when he encountered an ordinary Vampire, even though he could deal with them, he would still duck away. After all, he hadn't come here to level.

He had only one goal in mind and that was to retrieve the Chapter of Freedom!

As he stealthily traversed the labyrinth-like passages, he eventually arrived at the second floor of the tomb. During this period, he had come across several locked silver treasure chests. However, since he didn't have the Lockpicking skill or a suitable key, there was nothing he could do about them. He did have a [Silver Key](#) in his bag, but sadly it only worked for silver chests Level 20 and under, while the ones in this map were all at least Level 25 or higher.

Silver Key: Used to open Level 0-20 treasure chests that are Silver or lower. Uses remaining: 3/3

After passing through a cell, he discovered an object hidden in a corner. Only when he approached closer did he find that it was actually an old shabby chest. It was a chest that wasn't locked! He couldn't help but sigh to himself. This journey had been too trying on his heart, finding so many chests yet being unable to open them, but at last, he had finally encountered one that he was actually able to open!

It had taken him this long to encounter a chest that he could actually open, while/even though the journey had been so difficult.

Nie Yan bent down and opened the chest. After fishing around for a bit, he grabbed hold of what appeared to be a skill book.

He took it out to examine.

Skill Book: Grace of the Civet

Requirement: Level 20

Description: The player will gain a powerful movement ability by harmonizing mind and body.

Properties: Depending on the height, fall damage will be reduced by 10%-50%. Climbing Ability +10%, Balance +10, Reflex +10, Dexterity +10

Restriction: Thief; can be learned by any faction.

So it was actually Grace of the Civet! For a Level 20 player, the properties of this skill were relatively decent, but they weren't anything amazing. The first two properties, reduce fall damage and climbing ability, weren't as useful, but for Nie Yan, it was nevertheless a very fitting item. This was because the path that he walked was different from other players.

Ordinary Thieves only cared for Dexterity and Balance. Nie Yan on the other hand focused on Dexterity while simultaneously using special items such as the Silk Spinner Ring, Crawler Ring, Featherfall Jewel, and so on to create his own special way of playing a Thief.

The Thief profession wasn't limited to being only good at scouting, disarming traps, and assassinating lightly armoured targets. With what he was doing, he was giving this profession an entirely new definition.

In his previous timeline, he had always thought about creating

such a Thief but never possessed the strength to do so. The drop rates of the Silk Spinner Ring and Crawler Ring were incredibly low, which meant they were expensive enough that he couldn't afford them. As for the Featherfall Jewel, he was incapable of getting his hands on that as well. Although he did indeed beat Treant Forest on Specialist and a Featherfall Jewel did drop, when it came time to distribute the items, he never even had a chance of obtaining it himself. In the end, a Mage in the team took away the jewel with the rest of the team receiving three silver each. At that time, he was simply a bystander with no influence.

By the time he grew stronger, he had long exceeded the level requirements to enter Treant Forest and thus couldn't go back to obtain the jewel. Meanwhile, the equipment that had the Featherfall Jewel socketed into them were all expensive beyond reason. So even then, he still couldn't afford one.

As for Grace of the Civet, it was also an uncommon skill book. If not for him being the first to enter Abraham's Tomb, this item would have went to someone else!

Although the skill wasn't extremely important, it would at least be able to aid him in executing his plans more fluidly.

Nie Yan placed Grace of the Civet into his bag. I'll have to wait until Level 20 before I can use it, so I'll just keep it for now.

After passing through a long and narrow tunnel, he entered a relatively small room that was about one hundred square meters in size. There, he found three coffins made out of white marble. They appeared fairly ordinary with a simple twisting rune design carved

into them. The grooves in these carvings were filled with a bright red paint that resembled the colour of blood.

They were Fate Rune Formations!

These three coffins weren't actually as simple as they appeared. In fact, they were a very strange type of furnishing. Speaking precisely, they were the Undead race's Fate Items!

When the player opened these coffins, the Fate Rune Formations would activate, and then a random surprise would emerge.

Once a coffin was opened, it would reset after ten days.

There were stories that told of players obtaining various high quality items such as the Helmet of Death or even a fragment of a Legendary-grade item. However, there was also a player who had been unlucky enough to spawn a Vampire Prince, which, as one would expect, killed them in an instant.

The three marble coffins lay there in silence, a sense of enticement luring one forth, yet also the fearful unknown lurking about in the air.

Chapter 121 – Junior Magic Resonance

Potion Recipe

Nie Yan had to admit. Like many other players, he was extremely greedy, particularly when equipment was involved.

Even the slightest possibility of top-quality equipment emerging was more than enough to make countless players go frantic.

However, he wasn't a person without rationale!

With the Fate Dice, he had been both lucky and unlucky. Despite losing ten Strength, he also obtained astonishing benefits—Undead Rite and Pandora's Box. Considering the events since then, the usefulness of the former spoke for itself. As for the latter, it possessed the overpowered abilities of influencing luck and raising the grade of an item. As such, he was entirely content with disregarding the loss he suffered.

Nonetheless, that didn't necessarily mean he was willing to repeat such a gamble.

If, instead of him, an irrational person were to arrive here, they would definitely be blinded by greed and open these coffins without much consideration.

On the off-chance a Vampire Prince emerged, no matter how strong the player was, would they be able to run? Of course not! Such a high-level entity would never allow its prey to escape.

Therefore, their situation would be tantamount to a death sentence!

From Nie Yan's perspective, the consequences of dying weren't something he could brush off. Not only would he fail to retrieve the Chapter of Freedom, he would lose the Chapter of Courage as well.

He might be greedy, but he also understood his limits and only sought things that were achievable with his ability. As for opportunities that led to outcomes outside of his control, he felt better off forgoing them. After experiencing it once, he no longer wished to tangle with the fickle hands of fate.

He walked past the coffins and passed through a corridor sandwiched by iron bars. When he encountered a region with too many monsters, he patiently hid in a corner until the Crawler Ring and Silk Spinner Ring's abilities were off cooldown before climbing over from a relatively high and hard-to-reach location.

Furthermore, as he grew more accustomed to the Crawler Ring's ability, he became even more proficient in using it in conjunction with the Silk Spinner Ring. Now, he was able to cross over most obstacles effortlessly.

Without the Silk Spinner Ring, a player who possessed the Crawler Ring, upon arriving here, would have no choice but to turn back lest they be killed in one of these passageways.

After using the Crawler Ring to cross over a mob of Vampires, he

carefully scanned the passageway below. Completely empty... I should be safe. He deactivated the Crawler Ring's ability after which he dropped down from the ceiling and gently landed on the ground, not making a single sound in the process.

However, just as he was about to make his way forward, the sound of a spell being cast, originating from a pile of crates, arrived in his ears.

He spun around in search of the caster and noticed a pale-faced figure with a sinister appearance, condensing a dazzling sphere of lightning in its hands.

Wandering Mage: Level 23

Health 820/820

Many players often underestimated these Wandering Mages because of their low health, but Nie Yan knew better than anyone just how terrifying these monsters were. With their formidable magic power, they were easily capable of emptying his health pool in only two spells. Fortunately, the cast times for their magic was relatively long.

Perhaps he would be able to throw off this Wandering Mage if he ran now. However, there was a good chance that he might alert the monsters up ahead, sinking himself into an even more dangerous situation. As such, the best course of action was to deal with this problem while it was still within his control.

After it finished casting the spell, the crackling sphere of

lightning shot towards him.

Nie Yan rapidly retreated. Just as this lightning ball was about to hit him, he rolled to the side and narrowly avoided it.

The ball of lightning whizzed past him, striking the wall, and exploded into a shower of sparks.

After regaining his balance, he retrieved the Crossbow of Blood and fired at the Wandering Mage.

「Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!」Three crossbow bolts streaked through the air and struck their target.

-15

-15

-15

Sadly, if not for the on-hit true damage effect applied to the bolts, he wouldn't have even made a dent in the Wandering Mage's health bar. This was also one of the reasons why Thieves only used crossbows to draw aggro instead of farming mobs; they simply dealt too little damage. While it was entirely possible for a Thief to take advantage of terrain exploits to kill high-level mobs, if any player believed one was able to kite a high-level monster to death, they would be a complete idiot.

Nie Yan had no hope of killing the Wandering Mage with his

crossbow. The time he spent between shooting and evading was long enough for its natural health recovery to nullify a significant portion of the damage he dealt.

Since that was the case, just how much time would he waste before finally killing it?

However, during that exchange, he was able to figure out the cast time for his opponent's spell. He promptly put away his crossbow and dashed toward the Wandering Mage with a dagger in each hand. As he closed in on his opponent, he raised one of his daggers and bashed the pommel on the Wandering Mage's head even though he was unable to stun it.

Undead monsters were highly resistant, if not completely immune, to stuns. For a profession that relied on such effects, this was an extremely depressing problem. It meant that he was unable to interrupt the Wandering Mage while it was channeling its spell.

Unleashing a flurry of attacks, a string of damage values rose above his enemy's head.

-63, -67, -65...

Despite the gap in levels, the damage was quite decent.

He struck the Wandering Mage with Assassinate followed by Vital Strike. Although it didn't really have any vital areas to speak of, since it was undead, the damage scaling on the skill was better

than a normal attack.

As it was nearly finished channeling its spell, he hastily pulled back. After all, if he was too close, he wouldn't be able to dodge.

Finally, the Wandering Mage shot a ball of lightning at Nie Yan, who promptly dodged to get out of the way, taking cover behind a pile of crates. An explosion echoed out as the spell smashed into the crates, sending them flying everywhere.

In that instant, without missing a beat, he leaped out unscathed and resumed his assault.

Even though this method was quite tedious, after five minutes, he was able to whittle his opponent's health away until it finally died.

Seeing the Wandering Mage collapse on the floor, Nie Yan breathed out a sigh of relief. With his current stats, although he was able to kill monsters much higher level than him, the process of doing so was truly exhausting. Spending so much time to kill a single monster was simply too inefficient. Bending down to pick up the items that dropped, he was surprised to discover a recipe.

Junior Magic Resonance Potion Recipe

Requirements: Junior Alchemist

Properties: Magic Power +20

Materials: Rosegem Grass, Powdered Cow Horn, Neutralizing

His luck was surprisingly good. He actually found such a valuable drop. Even though Bird wasn't able to make use of it for now, he would be advancing to a Junior Alchemist pretty soon. The value of this recipe in the present day market was extremely terrifying—at the very least, selling for one gold.

Rosegem Grass was not at all expensive while the three other materials could be purchased from NPC shops. With regards to the current level of the playerbase, a potion that increased Magic Power by twenty was too frightening. Naturally, if the average player was over Level 20, they wouldn't think much of these potions since they were drops from Level 25 maps. Furthermore, Level 0–30 Junior Alchemist concoctions had no level requirements.

He stored the recipe away in his bag and proceeded on with his journey through the tomb. Since all of the monsters here greatly exceeded his level, he had a tough time dealing with even the most ordinary of mobs. Henceforth, he took even more care with every step he took forward, spending a significant amount of time.

In the end, he spent nearly two days exploring the interior of the tomb before finally reaching its core.

For the purpose of retrieving the Chapter of Freedom, let alone two days, he was willing to spend any amount of time on it as long he succeeded!

Nie Yan sat on top of a tall pillar as he observed an enormous plaza below. Occasionally, he would spot squadrons of Vampires making round patrols. The existence which they were guarding lay at the very center of this plaza—a huge crystal coffin, the final resting place of Necromancer Abraham.

Legends told that Abraham was sealed there eternally, never to awaken again.

Guarding by his side were two of his descendants, both of which were Level 25 Lord-class monsters.

Not far from the coffin was a stone platform, and placed on top of it was the Chapter of Freedom.

Currently, he was thinking of ways to evade the eyes and ears of the patrolling Vampires.

「Where are you right now?」Suddenly Nie Yan received a message from Sleepy Fox.

「I'm outside of the city, levelling. What's up?」

「We finally beat Sosil Valley. Of course, we only did it on Easy and Normal. Are you interested in joining us?」Sleepy Fox asked. He was hoping Nie Yan would guide them through Sosil Valley on Specialist.

「I'm busy right now, and besides, I don't really need anything there,」Nie Yan responded. Although the drops from the dungeon were pretty good, in comparison to the Chapter of Freedom, they weren't even worth mentioning. With two chapters from the Book of Order, he would never have to worry about his gear not being good enough. Therefore, there was nothing inside Sosil Valley that was capable of attracting his interest.

Sleepy Fox let out an awkward laugh. Just one sentence from Nie Yan had shattered his hopes. Did Nie Yan really have no interest in beating Sosil Valley on Specialist? Could he have already beaten the dungeon with another team? His background really was too mysterious.

Nie Yan thought for a moment and said,「I heard the game's official website should be announcing a new dungeon tomorrow. Go take a look, the drops there should be beneficial to your team. You guys should also prepare for the Level 10 dungeons. Since the devs have finished working out most of the kinks in the game, they should be releasing a new dungeon every two or three days. That's why these low-level dungeons don't really interest me.」Since he already had a set of good equipment, he didn't mind passing on the current dungeons. Only those who needed to improve their gear would be forced to run dungeons several times over in search of better equipment.

「Also, I heard a new potion shop opened in the eastern slums of Calore. Apparently, they're selling Black Phenol. Do you know who the owner is?」Sleepy Fox probed. He suspected Nie Yan was the owner of this shop. It was when he recalled Nie Yan selling him so many bottles of Black Phenol at once that he started to connect the dots. Even if this shop wasn't Nie Yan's, he was definitely

connected to it in one way or another. That shop still hadn't sold out of Black Phenol, seemingly possessing an endless supply. If there wasn't a formidable power behind it, how was it possible to run such a large business operation?

「I do, it was opened by one of my friends. Unfortunately, he isn't fond of being in the spotlight, so that's all I can say,」Nie Yan answered after thinking for a while. It was better to keep some matters hidden.

「Ah, so it was like this... Oh, I almost forgot, you're still busy levelling, right? I shouldn't disturb you any longer then. Let's talk some other time.」

「Thanks, I'll see you later.」Sleepy Fox's call had suddenly reminded him of a certain matter. Since he was so busy dealing with monsters these past two days, which constantly left him on-edge, he had completely forgotten to check up on his shop. Since he was mainly focused on retrieving the Chapter of Freedom, it would be a while before he would be able to return to the city. However, he recalled that there was a section in the chat that automatically posted news from it. He had never opened one in his previous life, so he hadn't developed the habit of monitoring its progress.

He searched around a bit before finding the shop notice window. When he opened it, a large row of messages covered his vision and left him in a momentary daze.

「02:39 (Notice): Starry Night Potion Shop has sold Black Phenol Recipe x1 for 30 silver.」

「02:40 (Notice): Starry Night Potion Shop has sold Black Phenol x12 for 7 silver, 20 copper.」

「02:40 (Notice): Starry Night Potion Shop has sold Black Phenol Recipe x1 for 30 silver.」

「02:41 (Notice): Starry Night Potion Shop has sold Black Phenol Recipe x1 for 30 silver.」

Chapter 122 – Escape!

Nie Yan's eyes widened in shock as notices flooded his screen. He never expected the shop to sell so much in only two days.

Over the last few days, the activity surrounding Sosil Valley, instead of lessening, had actually increased substantially! Even though the drops from the dungeon were good and the Werewolves there gave decent experience, the main reasoning behind this event was due to rumours of a new dungeon opening soon. For the sake of being better prepared when it opens, various players and guilds were feverishly gathering better equipment to improve their strength.

As a consequence, the demand for Black Phenol was greatly magnified. So, when the supply in the auction house eventually ran out, the major guilds began taking note of the Starry Night Potion Shop. Unfortunately, the Black Phenol and Black Phenol Recipes there were excessively overpriced. It was as if they were being squeezed for everything they had! However, since the owner was nowhere to be found, there was no one to negotiate with. Thus, after struggling for a long period of time, they finally caved in and began buying the shop's goods one after another. Despite being fully aware that they were being cheated, there was nothing they could do because the only place left that had Black Phenol and Black Phenol Recipes for sale was this single shop in the middle of the slums!

Often times, this was just the way the world worked.

After summarizing two days worth of sales, he had earned

another twenty-five gold!

In terms of earning money, who would be able to compete with him?

With more money in his pockets, he planned to rapidly expand his capital. After all, if he left it sitting there, its purchasing power would only slowly depreciate, because as the players gradually advanced in level, the value of in-game currency would definitely fall. Furthermore, since he had reached Level 10, it was finally possible for him to use the transfer point to teleport to other cities, allowing him to proceed to the next phase of his plan. His ambitions didn't stop only at Calore as he planned to purchase land in other cities too, but he wouldn't get the chance if he was late!

The competition over in-game real-estate was extremely fierce. Who would wait for others when all of these properties were being quickly eaten up?

Not to mention, his act of monopolizing the Black Phenol market also had an underlying effect. It would reduce the capital of the major guilds at least by some extent, slowing their rate of expansion while rapidly increasing his own.

Having received some good news, Nie Yan's mood instantly took a turn for the better. He had already figured out, as well as memorized, the movements of these numerous patrolling Vampires and, simultaneously, thought out a suitable plan. Although there was one small flaw in his plan, he still resolved to give it a try.

Nie Yan stared at the darkness below and walked the route he would take in his head. Finally, he jumped off the pillar, activating Stealth the moment he came in contact with the ground before disappearing into the background.

If he wished to stay outside of the detection range of these Vampires, he needed to stay at least ten meters away from them, which was exceedingly hard as he was no longer able to overlook their position from atop the pillar. Thus, he could only madly rush forward while strictly following the route he memorized in his heart.

He was completely relying on memory. Fortunately, he was confident enough that even if he was running around in the dark or his eyes were shut, he would still more or less be able to find his way.

After traversing about fifty meters, he came to a halt and held his breath.

Only ten meters ahead of him was a group of Vampires passing by before eventually moving into the distance.

Afterwards, a group of Vampires appeared from the rear and were walking in his general direction.

Noticing this, Nie Yan rapidly sped up and hurried forward in order to avoid them. Like this, he was constantly running and stopping. After a mere hundred meters, he had already evaded

over thirty groups of patrolling Vampires!

His memory, though not the best of the best, was undoubtedly excellent.

After madly rushing another thirty meters, he came to a halt once more, having finally arrived within thirty meters of the Lord-class Vampire Earls. These Earls wore brightly coloured attires and possessed fair, beautiful complexions. Their azure eyes were keenly scanning the area around them.

While maintaining his stealth, he looked past the Vampire Earls at the very top of the square stone platform where a delicate, black wooden box was placed. A mere glance instantly caused his heartbeat to race uncontrollably.

The Chapter of Freedom was nearly within reach!

As long as he was able to get ahold of it, it would belong to him. Then, he could safely teleport away with the Unknown Transfer Scroll.

Suddenly, three groups of patrolling Vampires emerged from different directions.

Nie Yan took a deep breath while trying to maintain a calm breathing pattern. The following step would be the most important. If he was able to avoid these three patrolling groups, he would have at least thirty seconds to get past the Lord-class

Vampire Earls and seize the Chapter of Freedom!

However, he wasn't fully confident whether he was in an absolutely safe spot. The reason he had taken his time staying up on that pillar for so long was because there were simply too many patrolling groups near the stone platform. Two of the patrolling groups were now extremely close to the ten-meter range, forcing him to take even more care as one wrong step would lead to him being discovered.

This was simply toying with death!

As the three groups of vampires made their patrols, they were drawing closer and closer to Nie Yan. Very soon, they would cross that ten-meter range. Seeing this scene, a huge lump emerged in his throat.

Calm down! He slowly calmed his mind as he stared at the patrolling Vampires nearby. The size of each patrolling group was fairly large. Some had several dozen in their ranks while others had over a hundred. In any case, he was clearly able to see their sinister appearances.

One group left the square followed by another. Apparently, Nie Yan's hopes were being fulfilled.

However, at this moment, an intense shout penetrated the air, shattering the silence in the square.

Nie Yan quickly locked onto the source of the sound. A Vampire had discovered him!

Subsequently, all of the Vampires drew their attention to him, including the Vampire Earls up ahead. Upon noticing an intruder, all of them went into an uproar.

Shit, they saw me! There was not an ounce of hesitation in Nie Yan's mind nor any to his movements. He whipped out a Basic Haste Scroll and tore it immediately. Then, with as much strength as he could muster, he sprinted towards the Chapter of Freedom. This was his final chance. If he failed to retrieve the Chapter, then he would be forced to escape with his Unknown Transfer Scroll and wait until the next opportunity arose.

It was quite possible that he would never get another chance prior to Level 20. After all, without the Unknown Transfer Scroll or something similar to save his life, he would never dare to come here to seize the Chapter of Freedom.

When the Vampire Earls' noticed his presence, they immediately dashed forward with an extremely fast speed, seemingly leaving after-images.

In the meantime, countless Vampires began pursuing him from the rear, cutting off all paths of retreat.

A Vampire lunged forward, causing him to spin to the side to avoid it. Not daring to slow down, he made a mad dash.

Dammit... If only Flash Powder, Web Scrolls, or Sheep Transformation Scrolls were effective. If only I had Tempest Step, or Advancing Dash. If only...

However, there was no time for ifs. The present Nie Yan was only Level 10. He was no longer a Level 180 Great Thief. He could only rely on his limited set of skills to display his limits.

In the previous timeline, when he was Level 10, he was an ordinary player who couldn't be any more mediocre. However, everything he did was completely unaverage and out of the ordinary, just like what he was doing now!

He still hadn't reached his limit!

He was like the wind as he rapidly drew close to the Chapter of Freedom. It was only about seven meters away—so close! He already took out the Unknown Transfer Scroll and tightly held it in his hand. As long as he retrieved the Chapter of Freedom, he would scam!

The numerous hordes of Vampires in the rear were quickly left behind in his dust.

At that moment, Nie Yan suddenly noticed the two Vampire Earls just in front of him. They bore their fangs and claws as bloody streaks of light flashed toward him.

In the instant that the Earls clawed at him, he ducked his head

and lunged forward, then with his right arm bracing the ground, he did a flip and dodged the Earl's attacks.

「Hiss! Hiss!」They angrily screeched as their attacks struck empty air.

Now only three meters from the stone platform, he stared at the black wooden box containing the Chapter of Freedom and activated the Silk Spinner Ring's ability. Soon, a web line shot into the air and stuck to the wooden box. With a hard tug, it flew into the air toward him.

Lunging forward once again, he extended his left arm and caught the box before transitioning into a roll.

He had obtained the Chapter of Freedom!

Though, the celebrations were cut short as he suddenly found himself unable to budge an inch. It was as if an invisible force had firmly bound him. In the rear, one of the Earls swiped its sharp claws toward the back of his head. It seemed, in the next moment, his brains were going to be splattered all over the ground.

However, an intense white light suddenly burst forth from Nie Yan's palm.

As the Earl's claws made contact with his head, unexpectedly, there was no blood or gore. The Earl paused for a moment in a daze. Since it had low intelligence, it had no idea what was

happening.

Nie Yan's entire body had turned illusory. In the next instant, he disappeared without a trace.

The Earl's attack had missed!

When Nie Yan opened his eyes, his heart was still rapidly beating. Just a moment ago, if he had been even a millisecond... He never expected the Earls to possess Spirit Bind. Such a skill was simply too terrifying.

Spirit Bind was a skill exclusive to monsters and could be used when they were within three meters of the enemy. Upon activation, both the user and the target would be unable to move for five minutes! As long as the Earl that targeted him didn't die, he would have been stuck there for the whole duration. Unless he had teleportation, a nullifying skill, or something along those lines, there would be no chance of escape.

Fortunately, he had activated the Unknown Transfer Scroll just in the nick of time. Otherwise, his brains would have been splattered all over the floor of the tomb.

He had re-emerged in the barren wasteland with no idea where he was. However, he could at least confirm that he was in Hems Wasteland. There was a group of Skeleton Fighters charging toward him, so he quickly sprinted away. As he ran, he was no longer able to hold back the emotions stirring in his heart and excitedly opened the box that contained the Chapter of Freedom.

A chapter from the Book of Order appeared before his eyes.

This was one of the chapters from the first volume, the Chapter of Freedom!

Nie Yan quickly examined the chapter's properties.



-Chapter of Freedom

Description: The sixth chapter from the first volume of the Book of Order, an incomplete piece of the legendary book.

Properties: Receive 2 Dexterity and 1 skill point every 5 levels.
Stealth +15, Cloak +15, Reflex +15, Strength +30

Disappear: Allows the player to stealth in the middle of combat. Has a certain probability of avoiding the enemy's attack.

Passive: Stealth +20

Sacrificial Gambit: Sacrifice 30% of current health for a 50%, 20%, or 10% chance to deal 200%, 300%, or 500% of the amount sacrificed as damage respectively.

Cooldown: 2 days (1/2)

Restrictions: Can only be used by a member of the Righteous Guardian of Order.

Note: Item effects are applied immediately upon entering the player's bag.

With two chapters from the Book of Order in his bag, Nie Yan suddenly felt reinvigorated as a wave of joy and relief washed over him. Now that he had these two chapters by his side, there was simply no comparison between the current him and his former self!

Chapter 123 – 130 Strength!

Disappear was an exceptional life-saving skill. In his previous timeline, it enabled Quiet Life to turn the tide of battle or escape the grasp of death unscathed on multiple occasions. As such, one could imagine just how vital this skill was to the success of both him and Victorious Return. As for Sacrificial Gambit, Nie Yan already possessed 360 health—30% of that would be around 100. In other words, once the skill was activated, he had a 50% chance of dealing 200 damage, 20% chance of dealing 300 damage, or 10% chance of dealing 500 damage. Although there was a 20% chance of missing, in terms of potential single-target damage output, it was still an extremely, terrifying skill.

In that respect, Sacrificial Gambit classified as an advanced Thief skill. Although a two-day cooldown might seem a little excessive, such a powerful skill naturally demanded some restrictions in place, much like Elemental Palace Magic and Templar Magic which had similar drawbacks. Not to mention, there was also [Adjudicator of God](#), the skill from the Chapter of Courage, which required ten full days before it could be used again. To this date, the skill had still yet to come off cooldown! Even if used efficiently, he would only be able to cast such a skill thirty-six times a year at most!

When activated, become immune to all magic, gain 500 health, and summon an advanced life-saving shield that absorbs 60% of all incoming damage for 5 minutes.

(This skill cannot be used in instances)

With Adjudicator of God, Disappear, and Sacrificial Gambit, Nie Yan reckoned he was pretty close to tackling another chapter from the Book of Order, but now wasn't the right time.

Checking his stats, he confirmed that his Strength had risen to 83. If he used the five passive skill books he had requested from Sleepy Fox, then figured out a way to raise his Strength by a few more points, he would finally be able to equip Sulgata's Boots.

「How's things on your side?」Nie Yan sent a message to Tang Yao.

「Not bad, I'm still grinding on the skeletons. My Arcane Fairy is only at 67% though. Hell, why is it so hard to rank it up? I've been at it for two days already. I swear I'm about to die from boredom! If I took the experience for myself instead, I would have already been Level 10!」Tang Yao complained in a gloomy and dissatisfied tone.

「Well, I don't really know what to say... Arcane Fairies are just difficult to raise. Hold out for another day or two, alright?」Nie Yan chuckled. In truth, this sort of monotonous grinding was like a form of torture for someone as restless as Tang Yao. Then again, his brother's temperament could use a bit of grinding and tempering...

「Sigh... I understand,」Tang Yao replied dejectedly. Rather than one or two days, he would be here for at least three more. After all, if he stayed here to train for another two days after raising his fairy's rank, he would easily be able to reach Level 10 or higher. Naturally, he didn't want to let such an opportunity slip by, since if he wanted to come back here, he would need to fork over another twenty silver for the transfer fee. Not to mention, without the Skeleton Kodos' protection, he would have no way of reaching these sandy dunes.

「Well, you should keep levelling. I'll be returning to the city first, but before that, did you bring a Return Scroll with you? I can give you one if you didn't.」

「No worries, I brought one. I'll be fine on my own.」

「Ah, alright. I'll be leaving then. Catch you later.」

Nie Yan found a spacious and empty area before he began channeling a Return Scroll. After a brilliant flash of light, he was teleported back to Calore.

「Have you found the skill books for Backstab and Eviscerate yet?」 Nie Yan sent Sleepy Fox a message as he leisurely strolled toward the auction house.

「We've found them. Where are you right now? I'll have someone deliver them to you.」

「Calore. I'll be beside the Auction House entrance.」

「Gotcha, someone'll be there in five minutes tops!」

Nie Yan patiently waited at the auction house entrance. Soon, a player from Holy Empire found him and initiated a trade, placing seven skill books in the trade window.

「Here are the items our guild leader asked me to give you.」

「Here's the thirty silver as payment.」He placed the money in the trade window.

「Alright, thanks.」

After receiving the payment, the Holy Empire player said goodbye before departing.

Nie Yan scanned over these skill books. Backstab and Eviscerate were both active skills that dealt decent damage. This left him quite satisfied since he was currently lacking such skills, hence why he had asked Sleepy Fox to search for a few. Afterwards, he glanced over at the five remaining skill books.

Power of the Barbarian, Primal Strength, Strength Amplification, Strength of the Restless, and Power of the Warlock increased Strength by 6, 5, 5, 5, and 6 respectively.

Despite being uncommon, skill books such as these were fairly inexpensive. Although their efficiency was limited and Thieves didn't place much importance on Strength, once they entered Nie Yan's hands, it became an entirely different matter. After learning the five passive skills, his Strength rose to 110. Now, he was only 20 points away from his target of 130.

This gap could be easily remedied. He proceeded into the auction house and sat down in a corner.

After purchasing all equipment and consumables that protected against petrification, he opened up the gem section in the auction house's catalogue, whereupon a dazzling display of glittering jewels was presented before his eyes. After searching for Strength Gems, hundreds of results were immediately projected on the display.

The Strength Gems were all of the lowest quality—Strength +3. If he wished to socket them, then he would need to bring them over to a Jewelsmith and pay a fee of three silver. In ordinary circumstances, most players would never part with such a sum. After all, equipment was swapped out too often at this stage of the game. If socketed on a good piece of equipment, there was the fear that the piece of equipment would be wasted. If socketed on a mediocre piece of equipment, then it was a waste of money. Therefore, player demand for Strength Gems greatly declined, which was why their price was somewhat on the low side, costing only three silver.

Nie Yan spent twenty-four silver to purchase eight Strength Gems. Afterwards, he headed over to a Jewelsmith and socketed two gems each into his gloves, shoulder guards, leg guards, and leather chest-armor.

After spending close to fifty silver, his Strength had finally reached 130. Having finished this long and arduous journey, he attained a level of Strength that was hard if not impossible to reach for an average Thief of his level.

And so, Nie Yan was able to equip [Sulgata's Boots](#) without any

problems. Thanks to this amazing piece of equipment, his stats were greatly increased once more. Not to mention, with the Shadow Dance skill, his ability to survive was enormously improved.

Sulgata's Boots (Legendary)
<p>Requirement: 130 Strength</p> <p>Description: A fragment of Sulgata's Shadow that had been broken into 3 pieces. These boots have remnant magical power and thus can still be equipped. The player must seek out the other fragments, as all three, Sulgata's Boots, Sulgata's Feather, and Sulgata's Cloth, are required to restore Sulgata's Shadow.</p> <p>Properties: Dexterity +30, Speed +10, Jump +10, Stealth +10, Cloaking +10, Reflex +10</p>
<p>Steal (Rank 3): Allows the player to steal money or items from other players or monsters</p> <p>Shadow Dance (Rank 3): Stealth +30, Cloaking +30, Speed +30. Cannot be detected through stealth for 6s upon activation. Afterwards, stealth has a chance of being seen through.</p>

He happily admired the boots on his feet. With their sleek design and the elegant yet unassuming runes etched into them, they emitted a beautiful glow that didn't appear too ostentatious, further adding to the mysteriousness of this fragmented Legendary-grade item.

Afterwards, he turned off the visual effects and began strutting

around as he broke them in, feeling extremely satisfied while doing so.

A Level 10 Thief wearing such good equipment... from an ordinary player's perspective, this was an unimaginable occurrence.

“Sigh, how long will it be till I can wear a complete Legendary-grade item? Now that would be really awesome...” Nie Yan muttered under his breath. However, Legendary-grade items were simply too rare and unimaginably difficult to obtain. In his past life, around when he was Level 120, Conviction's game developers had released some statistics. In all of Atlanta, there was a total of over fifty thousand pieces of Legendary-grade equipment scattered across the continent. In the Viridian Empire, there existed roughly ten thousand. Yet the number that fell into players' hands didn't exceed twenty. Many players owned fragments, but very few were able to collect all of the pieces to make a whole. As for the so-called godly equipment that players liked to brag about, they were no more than Sub-Legendary or fragments of a larger whole.

Nie Yan walked toward the eastern district to check up on his potion shop since he was unaware of how the situation had developed over the past several days.

A few minutes later, he arrived at the shop where he occasionally saw one or two players walk in and out. All of them wore relatively good equipment. Presumably, they were errand runners belonging to the major guilds.

“Welcome back, Milord!” Insei Rais hastily greeted after noticing

his arrival.

Nie Yan slightly nodded in reply before reviewing the shop's earnings: twenty-eight gold. Following the opening of the new dungeon, the major guilds would shift their attentions away from Sosil Valley, meaning the demand for Black Phenol would gradually diminish. At that point, he would sell for whatever he could get. Thus, it was imperative that he emptied his stock as quickly as possible.

“Milord, yesterday and the day before, Mr. Quiet Nannan, Mr. Still Grieving, and many others who saw your hiring sign came inquiring about your presence, but I was unable to reach you.” Insei Rais handed over a large list of names containing in the excess of sixty to seventy individuals. They were all Alchemists that had come to apply for the advertised position.

Even though the Starry Night Potion Shop only sold one type of product and had just opened, the Black Phenol stir had left many players shaken and wondering about the connections and financial resources of the shop owner. So when this mysterious figure began hiring, many Alchemists flocked over in the hopes of gaining benefits.

I didn't think there would be so many people. Nie Yan couldn't help but feel a little shaken as he skimmed through the list of names.

Name: Still Grieving

Occupation: Junior Alchemist

Name: Quiet Nannan

Occupation: Junior Alchemist

...

After going through all of them, he counted sixty-seven individuals. Surprisingly, there were twelve who were already Junior Alchemists. Among them, he found several familiar names that were fairly famous in his past life, such as Quiet Nannan and Still Grieving whom's net worths were over one hundred million. Although they weren't as famous as say someone like Bird Leaves No Eggs, they were still top figures in the Alchemist circle. Since the game had only recently opened, they likely hadn't found masters yet... As for the others on the list, they were also notable Alchemists that had no lack of fame.

If he personally interviewed these Alchemists, then naturally his connection to the Starry Night Potion Shop would be exposed. Among the potential hires, there were certainly a few who came harboring hidden motives. However, if he insisted on hiding his identity, he wouldn't be able to get any business done. After pondering for a moment, he called Bird over to the shop. Out of the people by his side, Bird could at least be considered trustworthy, so having him manage the shop shouldn't pose any problems. By placing him in the foreground, he would still be able to act from behind the scenes as the mysterious shop owner.

Nie Yan rejected the applicants who didn't have a good reputation in his previous lifetime before sending a message to the rest, telling them to come over to the Starry Night Potion Shop for an interview.

Altogether, ten Junior Alchemists and twenty-six Apprentice Alchemists received a request to be interviewed. Even if he were restricted to only employing half of them, that would still be good enough.

As for Quiet Nannan and Still Grieving, who were famous Alchemists in his past life, he would spare no expense in hiring them!

Nie Yan went into deep thought. If he were to spend five gold, he would be able to upgrade the shop from tier one to tier two. The benefits received from this included increased floorspace and a second-story expansion, which he had already set out plans for. On that floor, the hired Alchemists would each receive their own personal workshop. Furthermore, they would be barred from carrying any of the shop's medicinal ingredients outside, making for easy supervision while preventing people from stuffing their own pockets.

In this fashion, even if he invited a few unscrupulous individuals, he would have nothing to fear.

He eventually came to a decision. If he seized the moment by developing the shop right now, it would eventually become a golden goose that would provide him with a steady source of income. Besides, from his perspective, five gold was an investment

he was willing to undertake.

「System: Are you certain you wish to upgrade Starry Night Potion Shop to a Tier 2 Shop? The upgrade will cost 5 gold.」

Yes!

The Starry Night Potion Shop transformed into a structure of even greater splendor, appearing all the more conspicuous in this slum of short, run-down buildings. Presently, in the entirety of Calore, no other such shop existed!

Chapter 124 – Business

Now a two-story building that towered over its surroundings, the Starry Night Potion Shop gained an exterior constructed entirely out of white stone. Radiating a dazzling brilliance, the shop was breathtaking to behold. With intricate, beautiful designs carved into each pillar and crossbeam, they left any who gazed upon them in a state of reverie. Even the interior of the shop received a makeover, as the furnishings and containers appeared ever tidy and pleasant to the eye.

Shortly after being summoned, Bird entered the shop through the doorway.

“Boss, I’m here!” Bird called out as he staggered into the shop and glanced around, seemingly lost in admiration. It really is a Tier 2 shop! I wonder who the owner is, he couldn’t help but inwardly exclaim.

“Mhmm... Good, I have a little task for you,” Nie Yan acknowledged, then continued, “Starting from today, I’ll be leaving you in charge of this potion shop, at least for now... and I’ll assign you with a few tasks. As for benefits, if the shop does well, you’ll receive a bonus at the end of each month. Naturally, I won’t overload you with work. After all, your main goal should still be improving as an Alchemist since according to basic convention, you’ll only start getting a salary when you become a Junior Alchemist.”

“W-wait, you’re the one who opened this shop!?” Bird emotionally exclaimed. He knew Nie Yan was wealthy, but he

never expected him to be this wealthy. He heard from others that buying up a plot of land took at least one gold, opening a shop required two gold, and upgrading one cost upwards of five! Such exorbitant prices would leave the vast majority of players overwhelmed, wallowing in despair at their own inability. As for him, the prospect of opening up a shop was similar to staring at the clouds on the horizon, beautiful but perhaps eternally out of reach.

However, even though he was only acting as the shop manager, being entrusted with such a responsibility left him feeling touched and filled him with great satisfaction.

“Of course I’m the one who opened it. Why else would I ask you to be the manager? Anyway, let’s get down to business. In a little while, a batch of potential hires will be arriving through these doors for an interview. For now, I don’t want to reveal myself, so I want you to hire them in my place. As for the relevant arrangements and information, I’ll send them over to you in a bit.”

“I understand.” Bird simply nodded his head.

In that respect, Bird could be considered quick-witted, almost immediately understanding the underlying meaning of these words. For some reason or another, Nie Yan didn’t wish for his identity as the shop owner to be known to the public. As for the exact reason why, he didn’t dare to ask.

“Good, since you seem to understand, let’s move on to explaining your job. The NPC over there is Insei Rais. He’s the salesclerk of this shop on the first floor, while the second floor is a workshop for the Alchemists. For you to be able to do your job, I’ll allow you

the privilege of withdrawing a portion of the shop's money from him. Use it to buy alchemy ingredients so the workshop upstairs is always fully stocked. At the end of each day, bring everything that was produced over to him, because he'll be in charge of selling them. As for setting the prices, you can ask me. Finally, there's one more slightly inconvenient task I need to ask of you. Give me a report of the shop's income and expenses at the end of each week. Since the system automatically calculates that for you, it shouldn't eat up too much of your time," Nie Yan instructed. Whenever something came to mind, he would supplement with further detail on the spot.

As Nie Yan spoke, Bird quickly noted down his words lest he forget, though it seemed his daily workload wasn't going to be all that much. As long as he properly managed the shop, everything would be fine.

Nie Yan thought, If it's like this, then even if I don't personally manage the shop, it should still be able to operate smoothly under the procedures I've set. Plus, there shouldn't be any flaws in these policies either.

Suddenly, he spotted a hesitant look in Bird's eyes, as if he wished to say something yet didn't dare to.

"What? If you have something to say, just say it," Nie Yan said as he glanced at Bird.

"Boss, it's like this... With so many people applying, many of them already being Junior Alchemists, why did you pick me?" Bird hesitated for a moment before finally asking the question that was

brewing in his heart. If he hadn't, it would have kept gnawing away at the back of his mind.

Nie Yan chuckled in response, then said, "It's simply because I felt you were more deserving of trust than others, that's all."

"Trust, huh..." Bird took a deep breath. It had been a long time since he last heard anyone say that to him. When he was at his lowest, even the dogs would avoid him. When he chose the name Bird Leaves No Eggs, he did so as a subtle jab at himself. However, since then, he had staggered along and crawled to his current position. If he were to turn timid or afraid now, then he would be no more than a useless scoundrel! Especially in a time where no one believed him, having even a single individual put faith in him meant that much more. "Thank you," Bird said from the bottom of his heart.

Nie Yan simply smiled. After explaining the matters regarding managing the shop, he continued, "There are two Alchemists you should be especially mindful of. The first is Quiet Nannan while the other is Still Grieving. Listen carefully to their conditions for employment, then inform me of them." With those two, as long as they didn't go overboard with conditions, he would happily employ them.

"Alright, I understand!" Bird nodded his head, though he felt a bit of unease creep into his heart. After all, these two were Junior Alchemists while he was but a mere Apprentice Alchemist with a below average concocting success rate. It was no wonder he was feeling slightly pressured.

Bird had yet to fully embark on the path that would lead to him becoming the Alchemy King. So at present, he was no different from an ordinary Apprentice Alchemist.

“How long will it take you to become a Junior Alchemist?” Nie Yan asked.

“I think... another three or four days at least.”

Nie Yan nodded, then said, “Hurry up and practice. Here, this is a Junior Magic Resonance Potion Recipe. When Quiet Nannan and Still Grieving join, give it to one of them and have them start production immediately. These potions should fetch a decent price in the current market.”

“Right, I’ll pick the one with the higher production rate,” Bird responded, although he couldn’t help but feel dejected. If he were already a Junior Alchemist, then Nie Yan wouldn’t feel the need to hand over such a valuable recipe to others. However, he wasn’t a narrow-minded person. He understood that he had to rely on his own ability if he wished to accomplish anything. If he wasn’t up to the task, then it was only natural for Nie Yan to pass it on to someone who was.

The relationship between a contracted Alchemist and the employer was roughly the same as a mutual collaboration. By providing them with alchemy ingredients and recipes, as well as being in charge of selling their concoctions, the employer would receive a majority of the profits while the Alchemist would receive a base wage and a smaller share. If the Alchemist received a lucrative recipe from the employer, meaning the concoctions they

created sold well, then they too would be able to bask in the profits. However, if the employer provided a recipe that wasn't profitable, then both parties wouldn't earn much.

“Don't worry, there'll be better recipes in the future. I have a few Anti-Petrify Potion Recipes with me. Hand one to each of the Junior Alchemists and tell them to focus their production on these. I've also stocked the workshop upstairs with various kinds of alchemy ingredients, seven thousand portions to be precise. Two thousand of them are for Anti-Petrify Potions,” Nie Yan said. After so many visits to the auction house, he had already amassed a large quantity of potions, recipes, and the various ingredients required to create it. He also acquired over eighty pieces of equipment with Resist Petrify +7 or higher. He purchased most of them for under thirty copper while buying the ones with better properties for fifty copper at most.

Unlike Anti-Petrify Potions, the demand for Black Phenol would slowly dwindle over time because, aside from the Werewolves in Sosil Valley, there weren't many other places that had monsters with fear toxin. As for Anti-Petrify Potions, they would be useful for quite a long time even after the hype around Medusa's Lair died down. Therefore, their price would always remain stable.

Although Nie Yan had purchased a large quantity of Anti-Petrify Potions, the amount being poured into the marketplace was simply too much. Even though he would still have an influence on the market, causing the price of Anti-Petrify Potions to rise, he wouldn't be able to hold a monopoly over the market like he did with Black Phenol. Nonetheless, the price of Anti-Petrify Potions would still rise by at least five times. A 400% return on investment was enough to make most people go wild with joy.

Medusa's Lair was known as one of the harder and more profitable dungeons. Hence, the teams that were able to run it were also ones that could afford the related expenses.

The most valuable was still the equipment with Resist Petrify. Although the Gorgons didn't particularly have high attack, their Petrify ability was extremely difficult to deal with. If the player continuously used Anti-Petrify Potions to remove the status effect, then the number of potions consumed in a day would be staggering. However, if the player's Resist Petrify stat was 14 or higher, then there was basically no need to fear being petrified.

If three or more frontliners were outfitted with Resist Petrify gear, a team would be able to save at least twenty silver after running Medusa's Lair for a day. However, frontliners couldn't wear too many pieces of equipment with low defensive stats. Optimally, they would only have one or two. Otherwise, if it were three or more, the decline in survivability would completely tank and the team could easily be wiped. As a result of this, the value of equipment with Resist Petrify +7 or higher became that much more apparent. A single piece of such equipment, no matter how lacking it was in other categories, would sell for at least ten silver. And just like that, he would be able to make a profit of at least eight gold or more.

After settling the matters regarding the potion shop, when Nie Yan was just about to leave, a twenty-six-year-old man in an ash-gray robe walked into the building. He glanced at both Nie Yan and Bird before his gaze finally rested on Nie Yan's body.

“Excuse me, do you two know if the shop owner is here?” the player asked. From his perspective, between Bird, an Apprentice Alchemist, and Nie Yan, the latter looked more likely to be the owner.

As Bird’s gaze fell on the player’s neck, he noticed the collar of his robe was embroidered with a flower design using silver silk. A hint of envy flashed through his eyes. It was exactly this silver flower design that represented a dream that he had yet to achieve. It signified the honour of a Junior Alchemist!

Nie Yan shot a glance at Bird from the corner of his eye. Finally, Bird walked up to greet the player.

“I’m the owner of this shop. Do you have any business here?” Bird answered. He didn’t seem the least bit hesitant or lacking in confidence. In fact, he actually somewhat possessed the airs of an owner.

“Ah, I see. My name is Quiet Nannan. I heard you were hiring Alchemists,” the player responded. When he heard Bird announce himself as the shop owner, he was truly quite taken aback. However, on second thought, it did make some sense. [The genuinely wealthy players often wore plain and simple clothing.](#)

“With so many major guilds recruiting, you shouldn’t have any trouble finding work as a Junior Alchemist. So why did you come here and apply to my establishment instead of working for those major guilds?” Bird answered back with a question as he stared fixedly at Quiet Nannan.

Hoh... Nie Yan lightly nodded his head in approval. Earlier, he had informed Bird that he didn't want players with hidden motives joining his shop. It seemed Bird was quite prudent and knew exactly what sort of questions to ask.

Chapter 125 – City Of Jadeite, Hilderlocke

“Yikes, I’ve barely stepped foot through the door, yet you’re already throwing me curveballs! Hmm, let’s see... Of course there’s no point in joining a weak guild. That’s why I’ve been searching for a strong backer this whole time. When I found out about this shop, I was almost certain that it had a strong backer acting from behind the scenes, but I didn’t know exactly who. Perhaps a financial group or a major guild? I’m not sure which, but I’m certain it’s an entity with a terrifying amount of resources. It hasn’t been long since the servers opened, but you’ve already got a shop opened when even the major guilds don’t. That’s why I’m applying here, to see if my intuition was correct,” Quiet Nannan responded in a frank and very direct manner. He felt using flowery words to praise and flatter would have sounded insincere, so he chose to go with a more direct approach.

How many days had passed since the game’s release, probably half a month at most? Yet a Tier 2 shop had already sprung up in this region of the city. Even if it was located in the slums, how could such an event go unnoticed?

Bird nodded his head in approval, then said, “We offer a 10% cut to contracted Alchemists at your rank. Are you still willing to join?”

“So low? The other guilds offered at least 20% plus a base salary.” Quiet Nannan furrowed his brows. This offer was simply too stingy. He’d be much better off joining a small guild.

Even Nie Yan couldn’t help but be taken by surprise when he

heard Bird's offer. He had given Bird full authority in hiring Alchemists. As long as the cut was 30% or lower, Bird had full power in making the decision. Plus, for players like Quiet Nannan and Still Grieving, he was even allowed to offer a few additional benefits as incentives to get them to join. Never did he expect that Bird would open with such a low offer. Just what would he do to convince these Alchemists to stay? Nonetheless, Nie Yan held the firm belief of not suspecting those he employed and not employing those he felt were suspect. As such, he planned to stick through and observe how this scene would unfold.

Bird replied to Quiet Nannan in a calm and collected manner. "We don't offer a base salary here because such a thing is negligible. What we do offer though is an inexhaustible supply of alchemy ingredients and a lucrative platform to sell your concoctions on. If you want to earn big, the floor above has just what you need: ingredients—enough to keep you busy from morning to sundown. Moreover, we have enough personal workshops to provide one to each new hire. To add to that, we're also planning on expanding rapidly, Tier 3, Tier 4, Tier 5... Nothing is out of our reach. Alchemists will be flocking to our doorsteps every single day. We'll become the largest potion shop in all of Calore. Hence, only after you've proven yourself, by making this establishment a decent profit, will we even consider raising your share up from 10%."

Listening to Bird boast so wildly, Nie Yan was left speechless as he broke into a wry smile. Still, this method was indeed suitable. Since human nature was so fickle, if an offer was too generous, then the other party might not show a sense of appreciation, as they might feel such treatment was naturally deserved. With Bird's method, however, not only was it persuasive, but he would also be able to secure their loyalty if he provided them with sufficient

benefits in the future.

Seeing this performance, any prior misgivings that Nie Yan held were completely swept away. Bird had shown that he was fully up to the task. Even if he didn't find success as an Alchemist, perhaps he would do quite well in management.

Perseverance, patience, and a focus on excellent character was the prerequisite for success. If someone possessed all of these traits, as long as they were provided with a good environment to grow, they would definitely flourish. As for those who had these traits yet didn't succeed, it wasn't because they lacked the ability but because they lacked a good platform to support their growth instead. So, as long as Nie Yan set up a decent stage, it was still possible for him to unearth many outstanding talents.

Therefore, if he wished to seek out good seedlings, he couldn't only base his judgement off of those who had succeeded in his past life. Of course, those famous existences were much easier to find. Looking at it from this point of view, if they were readily available, then what reason did he have to ignore them?

Quiet Nannan contemplated for a brief moment before replying, "Can I take a look at the second floor?"

Bird covertly shot a glance at Nie Yan from the corner of his eye. Seeing the slight nod of approval, he said, "No problem, follow me."

As the two began walking upstairs, Nie Yan sent Bird a whisper.

「I'll be taking my leave. The shop is in your hands. Just like you said earlier, we'll be constantly expanding and recruiting more and more Alchemists. Several dozen is too few, and several hundreds won't be enough either.」

「I understand, boss. Rest assured, you're leaving the shop's matters in good hands.」

Nie Yan possessed sufficient capital to invest. As for the question of whether a concoction would sell well in the future or if it would spike in value, he would always be able to put out an accurate judgement. Under his guidance, there would be absolutely no problems in the future business of the Starry Night Potion Shop.

Not only that, but he wished for the Starry Night Potion Shop to transform into a behemoth that all future Alchemists would aspire to work at!

Aside from purchasing from the auction house, he still required another stable source of alchemy ingredients and recipes. Otherwise, the shop would be completely subject to the fluctuation of the market. If an entity capable of rivaling the shop were to arise in the future, then the Starry Night Potion Shop's inability to adapt would really start to show.

While pondering over this problem, Sleepy Fox popped into his mind. If he had Holy Empire as a supplier, then he would no longer need to worry about finding a steady source of alchemy ingredients and recipes. What's more, he would also be able to secure a collaboration pact and gradually make their interests coincide.

At that time, it was only because Cao Xu held control over Victorious Return and four other guilds that he was able to secure his powerful position. If Nie Yan wished to gain a foothold, then he couldn't rely solely on himself. However, at the same time, he couldn't be entirely reliant on others!

Since he had returned to the past, every step that he took forward was incredibly firm. His strength, both personal and financial, was constantly growing. Even so, he was still well aware that his time was limited. When the game began merging with the real world economy, he would have no choice but to face up against numerous enemies. The path he would walk in the future was going to be incredibly rocky.

He had always felt a sense of urgency at the back of his mind, and it would only be pacified if he put in his greatest effort.

After withdrawing twenty-five gold from the shop, Nie Yan walked out and headed for the auction house to acquire more Anti-Petrify related items. While here, he also purchased a large quantity of recipes, ingredients, and other items that might rise in value in the future. He sent all the alchemy related items to the potion shop and deposited the equipment.

As soon as he finished his business in the auction house, Nie Yan checked his personal storage. Inside, items of all shapes and sizes were tightly packed together. In total, the value of everything inside his storage was roughly nine gold, and it was expected to rise by a significant margin in the future.

Even with everything settled, he still had sixteen gold remaining in his pockets. He headed over to the transfer point area to proceed with the next phase of his plan.

「System: Are you certain you wish to teleport to City of Jadeite, Hilderlocke. The cost of teleporting to another city is 1 gold.」

The transfer fee was this high because there was a considerable travel distance between the two cities. This was also why there tended to be less travel to other cities.

Yes!

A few seconds later, a fascinating city, one that seemed to come out of a dream, emerged before Nie Yan's eyes.

As a matter of fact, this city was erected right in the center of a forest. Numerous tall trees towered high into the sky, covering the entire city in their shade. The forest's emerald green washed over the city's pure white buildings, creating a breathtaking and harmonious spectacle. This, when combined with the mottled sunlight that shone down from the canopy above, made for a matchless scene of beauty.

Although there was a constant flow of players walking down the street, the bustle and liveliness here was much less than in Calore.

Hilderlocke was one of six major cities in the Viridian Empire. The real-estate here had the highest potential to rise in value because there were more high-level maps around the city. As such, the popularity of this place would progressively rise in the future. At the same time, Hilderlocke had the fewest properties for sale. In total, there were only about a dozen or so plots listed. At present, there wasn't much attention on the city, but in the future, the land would become extremely expensive. The prosperous commerce in this city simply couldn't be compared with Calore's, but the prices were excessive beyond reason, at least several dozen times more expensive.

Nie Yan was currently eyeing the potential of the real-estate market here, which was his reason for coming. He definitely had to buy the most valuable property with the highest potential to appreciate. Only then would he get the most value out of his investment.

He headed for the administrator's office located at the heart of the city. Upon arriving, he was greeted by the sight of a magnificent crystal palace flanked by courtyards on both sides. Each courtyard contained a fountain and a lush garden where various kinds of exceptionally beautiful flowers grew—all seemingly struggling over each other to stand out more.

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Administrator Kallan.”

He was Hilderlocke's administrator, a slightly obese, middle-aged man with a robust stature and an amicable expression.

“Greetings, adventurer from Calore. You've come a long way.

How may I help you?”

“I’d like to purchase some property in Hilderlocke.”

“I see. Then please follow me.” Administrator Kallan led Nie Yan inside.

After entering the office, he was presented with a holographic model of the city which listed all available properties.

“We have a total of twelve properties listed for sale distributed here, here, and furthermore, here... We offer excellent quality service to those who would like to do business in Hilderlocke. Not to mention, we also have laws to protect your interests. However, since you’re not from this city, we have a regulation that you must follow. If a resident from another city wishes to purchase a piece of property here, they will need to pay an additional 60% in fees. When reselling a property, there is also an additional exorbitant transfer fee,” Administrator Kallan explained.

Nie Yan examined the twelve properties. The cheapest was two gold, but since he wasn’t a resident of the city, it would cost 60% more. It would be best if he found a resident to help him purchase property in his place, but unfortunately, he didn’t have a trustworthy contact here.

He glanced over the model of the city and quickly found the property he wished to purchase. It was located in an intersection by the southern gate of the city. The price was about eight gold, and it was a considerably large property, perfect for a large auction

house. Even if he had to pay 60% more, it would still be well worth the purchase.

In the future, the southern part of Hilderlocke would become its most bustling area. This was because players would have to pass through this city to reach many of the soon to be major dungeons such as City of Gold. Not only that, but the southern gate was also to become a hot spot for players forming teams to run nearby dungeons. One could well imagine the potential for development in the future.

“I want to purchase this property,” Nie Yan said as he pointed at the property near the southern gate.

“The price of this property is eight gold. Since you’re not a resident of the city, the total will come to twelve gold and eighty silver.”

After paying the money, he received the title deed for the property from Administrator Kallan without any problems. With this piece of paper in his hand, he suddenly felt much more confident. As someone who experienced firsthand what it was like to be miserable and destitute, he understood that owning a piece of property was the best form of reassurance.

Chapter 126 – Battle Crazy Alliance

The true worth of the property would only manifest itself in the future. So long as it was left there, its value would rise astronomically with each passing day.

Going off whatever funds were remaining, the number of things Nie Yan could purchase became severely restricted. Now, even buying one or two plots would place him in dire straits. As such, his goal was not to buy up whatever he could but rather to attempt to gather as much money as possible. After all, a single person was limited in what they were capable of. He could accomplish only so much by relying solely on himself.

“Hilderlocke is a beautiful city, and its residents are kind and friendly. On behalf of the city, I’d like to extend my warmest greetings. Feel free to come here if you wish to purchase more properties, and I sincerely hope you have a pleasant time during your stay,” Administrator Kallan said. He smiled in a heartfelt manner and appeared rather affable.

Nie Yan’s eyebrows raised as Kallan’s words suddenly reminded him of a certain piece of information. According to rumours, the administrator of Hilderlocke was the most good-natured out of all the administrators in the empire. What he loved the most was to hear players praise his city.

“I love Hilderlocke. It truly is the most beautiful city I’ve been to. I would even go as far as to say that it’s the most brilliant jewel of the empire...” Nie Yan was by no means stingy with his praise as he glorified the city to no end, so much so that he was inwardly

cringing at the words coming out of his mouth.

Nonetheless, Administrator Kallan seemed very enthused. As his eyes curved into crescents, his gaze became all the more friendly.

「System: You have received a favourable impression from Administrator Kallan. Your Influence in Hilderlocke has increased by 7.」

Nie Yan never expected a few lines of flattery to produce such a result. He had actually obtained seven points of Influence!

“Hilderlocke is indeed a beautiful place. This fact is undisputed. Let me tell you the story of how it came to be known as the City of Jadeite...” Administrator Kallan grabbed a hold of Nie Yan’s hand and took advantage of the opportunity to tell him a few entertaining anecdotes. In the beginning, Nie Yan was only playing along, but then, as he listened more and more to the content of these stories, he became increasingly shocked.

Kallan told him about a golden city located south of Hilderlocke. Although its fame spread far and wide across the continent, what very few people knew was that in the sea to the east of Hilderlocke, there was a golden island. This zone was restricted to players above Level 60, and it produced all sorts of precious gems in abundance. Reportedly, it was also the last known location of where the Legendary-grade weapon, Staff of the Adjudicator, was spotted.

Kallan also spoke of a mysterious Master Blacksmith named Krusch, who took up residence in the northern district of the city. On Mondays and Wednesdays, he would put a selection of magical equipment up for sale. With Administrator Kallan's introduction, he would be able to go over and take a look. Naturally, Kallan also informed him of the coordinates to this place. If he was lucky, then he might even be able to snag one or two pieces of top-quality equipment!

Apart from this, Kallan also informed him of several locations he could visit to purchase uncommon low and intermediate level items. Nie Yan felt he had scored big time as he soaked in all of this valuable information.

Suddenly, in the middle of their conversation, he picked up the sound of someone entering the building. He raised his head and saw a Berserker heading toward them.

He was wearing a full set of dark golden plate armour etched with pitch-black grooves and studded with metal sawtooth spikes. With a massive two-handed sword strapped to his back, he made his way across the crystal floor. Every step he took made his armour shake with a rhythmic beat. For all intents and purposes, this man was armed to the teeth, and with his tall stature and heavy armour, he radiated a powerful and domineering aura.

The Berserker revealed a hint of shock when he spotted Nie Yan. After pausing momentarily, he walked straight over to them.

The Metal Storm Set, presently the best set for Berserkers! Nie Yan's eyes narrowed as he activated Transcendent Insight to

examine the other party.

He took it out to examine.

Kill Love: Level 11

Profession: Berserker

With such good equipment, there was no way he would believe the other party was some sort of no-name, run-of-the-mill player, but never in his wildest dreams did he expect it to actually be him!

Kill Love was the leader of Hilderlocke’s number one guild, Battle Crazy Alliance. During the peak of their power, they reportedly occupied five of the six strongholds in Hilderlocke. He was fully deserving of his title as one of Hilderlocke’s overlords because, in the entire Viridian Empire, his strength was ranked in the top five. It was only after a certain incident occurred that he withdrew himself from the power struggle. Apart from his resounding title in the game, as the owner of the Battle Crazy gaming organization, he was a famous figure in reality as well. At present, he was ranked fifth on the leaderboards for Berserkers, and it seemed he was only going to keep rising.

In the previous timeline, Kill Love was an influential figure that Nie Yan had no hopes of interacting with. If he were to sign up for the leaderboards, he would probably be ranked in the top two hundred at best. He had only been a step away from advancing to a Shadow Dancer, but who knows how many valiant adventurers before him had failed while taking that final step? In contrast, Kill

Love was ranked as one of the top three Berserkers. Never once had he fallen lower, and in his prime, he had held the number one position for over an entire year.

It was his influence that had helped Hilderlocke become so incomparably splendid.

The gaming organization known as Battle Crazy was always very powerful with six players in the top thirty of their respective class. With unshakable dominance and a reputation for battle, they used their guild to sweep across all of Hilderlocke. Later on, they were even able to secure two strongholds in Moonlight City.

When Victorious Return began their quest to take over the continent, Battle Crazy Alliance had single-handedly resisted a combined assault from Victorious Return and Bloodlust Blades, causing them to suffer disastrous losses. With less than a hundred thousand members, they had beaten back the combined forces of Victorious Return and Bloodlust Blades which totalled six hundred thousand players. For a short time, they were completely unrivalled, but under the influence of Cao Xu's meddling, they slowly began collapsing from within. Very quickly, close to twenty key players left the gaming organization, leaving Kill Love and his Battle Crazy Alliance to face their eventual defeat. After that, many players began leaving the guild until only a little over half of the members remained.

However, Kill Love and these sixty thousand remaining members firmly held onto their last stronghold in Hilderlocke. Even while being besieged by over three hundred thousand enemies, they remained unyielding and endured the assault, beating back the

forces of Victorious Return and Bloodlust Blades countless times over. In the end, after being unable to make any progress, the two guilds ceased their assault and withdrew.

With his unshakable willpower and determination, he succeeded in creating a legend out of his name.

Although Battle Crazy Alliance only had sixty thousand players remaining, those members were unified and held a deep, unwavering loyalty toward the guild akin to a kind of firm and deep-rooted belief. As for those deserters, whenever the guild was mentioned, they would all feel deeply ashamed. When they should have been fighting with their comrades on the stronghold walls, they had instead abandoned them and ran away. Compared to those members who had stuck with the guild to the very end, they were seen as nothing more than despicable traitors and cowardly trash.

Fighting together against a powerful enemy, living and dying together, this was true camaraderie!

Nie Yan deeply admired this type of sentiment, so toward Kill Love, he felt nothing but respect.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Kill Love,” the man smiled and said in a forthright manner, pulling Nie Yan out of his reminiscing. His bearing and manner of speech made it very difficult for others to associate him with the violence loving guild leader of Battle Crazy Alliance.

“Hi, I’m Nirvana Flame.” Nie Yan nodded his head in

acknowledgment. An enemy of his enemy was a friend. In his past life, Kill Love definitely wouldn't have had a battle to the death with Victorious Return and Bloodlust Blades for no reason. There was probably some previous conflict that carried over from another game.

“We haven't met before, have we?” Kill Love asked. He would recognize any player in Hilderlocke so long as they held even a little fame. Even if he hadn't met them yet, he would have at least heard of their name. Hence, Nie Yan's unfamiliar appearance and name filled him with curiosity.

“That's correct. I came here all the way from Calore,” Nie Yan responded. He didn't feel the need to conceal this information. Besides, with a little digging, Kill Love would have eventually found out anyway.

“Oh, Calore? Quite a few big guilds are based there, right?” Kill Love said. Although Hilderlocke was one of the six major cities, compared to Calore, it could only be considered a small city or big town. “You don't seem to be part of any guild.”

“I'm a solo player. So... no, I'm not part of a guild.”

“You bought that plot of land over there...?” Kill Love asked in a surprised tone. He pointed at the southern part of the model. While walking over, he had happened to spot the model of the city through the office door.

“Yes.”

“I’ve actually had my eye on that property for quite some time now. It was really hard for me to scrape together all the funds to afford it. Who knew that by the time I arrived, it would have already been bought by someone else. You have pretty good foresight,” Kill Love said with a wry smile. One must know, he had spent three entire days scrounging for enough money to buy that property.

“Ah, what are the chances...”

“Haha, it’s nothing. I’ll just buy a different plot of land,” Kill Love said while waving his hand, choosing to drop the matter entirely. In that respect, he could be considered quite magnanimous.

“Excuse me, may I ask which property you would like to purchase?” Administrator Kallan smiled at Kill Love and asked.

“This one should be fine.” Kill Love walked up to the model and pointed at a plot of land after which he and Administrator Kallan completed the transaction. Even though the property he selected was a bit lacking compared to Nie Yan’s, it was still in a prime location that would tremendously appreciate in value over time. Evidently, Kill Love had a very good eye for real-estate. His high rank signified that he was quite proficient in the game. His strategic foresight probably didn’t lose out to Nie Yan’s by much.

Encountering Kill Love this time around gave Nie Yan a wake-up call of sorts. Amazing players were everywhere in the game. If he

had been a little bit later, the property he was eyeing would have been bought up by Kill Love instead. Moreover, since Kill Love was making a move, this meant the other guild leaders were probably beginning to purchase land as well. As these notable figures made their moves, the properties would be eaten up at a frightening pace. If he didn't hurry and secure a few more properties for himself, then he would very likely lose the chance in the near future.

“How about we add each other as friends? Another ally means another path. Also, are you interested in joining my guild? Considering your financial resources, it would be very beneficial if the both of us were to join forces. At least in Hilderlocke, there won't be any guild that will be able to oppose us,” Kill Love said. This was his true objective. Although Nie Yan's background was a mystery, he was a lone player who was able to afford a sum unimaginable to the vast majority of the playerbase. This in itself was worthy of paying attention to.

“Adding each other as friends is fine, but I'm a player who enjoys freedom. I'm not used to being tied down by a guild.” Nie Yan tactfully declined his invitation.

“No problem, I understand,” Kill Love replied. He didn't have high hopes in the first place. However, making a new contact wasn't too bad either. Since Nie Yan purchased a property in Hilderlocke, they were almost certain to interact quite frequently with each other in the future. Whether they ended up as friends or enemies, it was better to know a little more about the other party first. After all, know thyself, know thy enemy. That was the only way to emerge victorious in any battle.

「System: Kill Love has sent you a friend request. Do you wish to accept?」

Yes!

「System: You have added Kill Love as a friend.」

Nie Yan only had one thought in his mind when he added Kill Love. Although the two parties weren't in conflict with each other for the time being, if there ever came a day when Battle Crazy Alliance decided to take up arms against Victorious Return, then Kill Love would become a potential ally he would try to win over.

Chapter 127 – Krusch's Scam

“Hey, I don’t know when you plan to start developing your property in Hilderlocke but I’m hoping when that time comes, we can meet as friends rather than enemies.”

Kill Love noted down the name Nirvana Flame in his mind. He planned to do a little investigating on this new friend of his from Calore and find out what powers he was affiliated with. If Nie Yan was an enemy, then he would abandon all pretense at politeness and do everything in his power to prevent him from establishing a presence here. For instance, if Nie Yan only planned to resell the property once it appreciated in value, then he would have nothing to say nor would he interfere. However, if Nie Yan wished to open up a business, he would guarantee that establishment would receive no customers. A strong dragon would not be able to suppress a snake in its burrow. Even if Nie Yan was a powerful and ferocious dragon, Kill Love had nothing to fear because Hilderlocke was his home turf.

Nie Yan understood that every city had its big shots, and without the appropriate strength or backing, it would be nearly impossible for him to gain any influence. He would find it very difficult to do business here if Kill Love were to become his enemy. However, since it was only a single plot of land, even if he didn’t start a business, he would at least be able to make a fruitful return on his investment when the property’s value appreciated in the future.

“I also hope we don’t become enemies.” Nie Yan faintly smiled. Although he and Kill Love had no reason to come into conflict nor were they likely to become enemies, no one knew for certain what fate would have in store for them.

“I still need to bring my team for a dungeon run, so let’s chat again some other time. Hopefully our next conversation can be as friendly as this one.” Kill Love wasn’t willing to forge any sort of deep friendship. After all, if they were to get along now but became enemies in the future, it would complicate matters more than necessary.

“Alright, I’ll see you later.”

A thought popped into Nie Yan’s mind as he gazed at Kill Love’s departing figure. Perhaps I should stroll around Hilderlocke first, maybe visit that Master Blacksmith Krusch and see if there’s any good gear I can buy. Then, I should probably go off and level again. He had spent more than two days exploring Hems. Given the levelling speed in Sosil Valley, those elites probably rose quite a bit in level as well.

There’s already a player with the Metal Storm Set... It seems my actions so far still aren’t enough. I’m still too slow... The Metal Storm Set wasn’t actually just one set but rather a line of Warrior equipment sets that shared the same label. They were the Iron Storm Set, Black Iron Storm Set, Gold Storm Set, Black Gold Storm Set, Lumidium Storm Set, and Black Lumidium Storm Set. Each of these sets had Strength prerequisites, and the lowest ranked, the Iron Storm Set Kill Love wore, already required the player to have 120 Strength.

Nie Yan had only been able to reach 130 Strength because of the Chapter of Freedom, five passive skills, and Strength Gems.

Yet Kill Love, on the other hand, was able to attain 120 Strength without the added benefit from socketing his equipment. Moreover, when he equipped the Iron Storm Set, his Strength was increased by another thirty percent. That was a little too terrifying.

Kill Love had the best gear out of all the players he had encountered so far. He was a player capable of being placed at the very top of the leaderboards, and Nie Yan couldn't help but wonder how many others out there were just as monstrous as him.

It seems I'll have to speed up the pace on both levelling and gathering better equipment! Nie Yan no longer dallied as he bid farewell to Administrator Kallan before heading off toward the northern region of Hilderlocke. Returning to Calore would cost him another gold. Besides, since he was already here, he might as well give Master Blacksmith Krusch's place a visit. There was no harm in doing so, and today just happened to be Wednesday!

The buildings in Hilderlocke were magnificent as ever as he walked along the emerald green streets paved with jadeite. While observing the sights, he distinctly noticed that the city seemed to be identical to the one in his memories. As he looked up toward the sky, he saw a bright halo formed by magical energy revolving over the city. Its presence added to the enchanting nature of this place that seemed to come out of a storybook.

After walking around for ten or so minutes, Nie Yan eventually came across a forked road. He glanced at the directions Administrator Kallan gave him before taking the road on the left. He made twists and turns, and as he got farther, the streets became

progressively more narrow. If not for having the exact coordinates, he would have believed himself to be lost.

Yet truthfully, he really had no idea where he was. All he knew was that he had arrived at the outer reaches of the northern district, and that without Administrator Kallan's aid, it would have been impossible for him to come here.

As he proceeded forward, he strolled past several mage towers into a narrow alleyway that was only wide enough to fit a single person. Three minutes later, he walked out from the other side and entered a wide clearing. There, he was greeted by an exquisite garden filled with various kinds of wildflowers in full bloom, many of which he didn't even know the names of. Even when being surrounded by numerous buildings, rays of sunlight still managed to reach them. The garden's location did not detract from its beauty, and on the contrary, it actually further added to the mystery of this place.

At last, the long, narrow, and winding path led him here.

Just past the garden, he saw an odd little cabin with a distinctive appearance.

This should be the place. It really is hidden quite well... Nie Yan thought before walking over to the cabin.

As he drew close, the door gently opened and a silhouette emerged from the cabin, following which an intoxicating fragrance invaded his nose.

Nie Yan paused to stare at the figure. It was a female NPC. She wore a splendid dress with her hair coiled up into a [tall fanciful bun](#). Her footsteps were graceful and elegant, and she radiated the airs of a person belonging to the higher class. This NPC should be a noble...

This is Master Blacksmith Krusch...? She doesn't really fit the appearance though.

Then again, Administrator Kallan had never actually informed him of Master Blacksmith Krusch's gender.

With Transcendent Insight, Nie Yan inspected the NPC's information.

Delina: Countess of Hilderlocke

The Countess of Hilderlocke...! Nie Yan immediately stood off to the side to let her pass. Nobles enjoyed a high degree of privileges in their respective city. If a player were to offend them, then they would have no hopes of living comfortably in that city.

A player would only be able to enter the ranks of nobility, and thereby enjoy its associated privileges, by accumulating a great deal of Honour and Influence in a city. Even then, there was a strict system of hierarchy from Lords, Barons, Marquises, and so on. For those who weren't, provoking a noble was basically a death wish since the city guards would not hesitate to do their dirty work.

In passing, the Countess gave him a sideways glance.

A brief moment later, two more nobles exited the cabin in succession, brushing past Nie Yan as they walked by.

This place is more lively than I thought... Nie Yan thought as he set foot inside. In the very center of the room, he saw a round table with several dozen of the same pieces of equipment on display.

There were also a dozen NPC nobles, both young and old, inside the cabin, all of whom wore extravagant clothing. One of them in particular stood out. It was an old man in an ash gray robe standing beside the round table. With a tall and thin stature and a long flowing white beard, he very much resembled a wise old mage. If not for his careless slips, revealing his true wretched nature, then a person might not have noticed he was only keeping up a facade. This guy, he can't be a swindler can he...?

Nie Yan raised his guard. Swindlers didn't only exist among players but NPCs as well. There wasn't always a reward for a quest. In some of them, if a player was careless and failed to see the main objective, they would end up falling into a false ending set up by the system. When that happened, the player would have no choice but to resign themselves to their bad luck. Putting aside that they accomplished nothing, they had also carelessly walked into a trap.

"Ladies and gentlemen, today's sale will be the same as the last. The first batch consists of twenty items, all with the exact same appearance. None of them have been appraised. Each one will cost

sixty silver, but only one is real. The rest are counterfeits I created. If the genuine item is bought, then we'll move onto the next batch. There are only three batches remaining. Customers are limited to three purchases each. The best pieces of equipment are on the verge of being born. Among them, there's no lack of Legendary-grade equipment fragments. Are we all ready to begin?" After the old man named Krusch finished speaking, his eyes narrowed and he began tapping on the table with his fingers.

The crowd of nobles stirred with excitement as each and every one of them was eager to give their luck a try.

Krusch shot a glance at three middle-aged nobles in the crowd, then continued, "Alright, let's begin. Ladies and gentlemen, I wonder... Who among you will obtain the favour of Lady Luck?"

Nie Yan sneered. Such a low level trick, yet so many people are falling for it... He swept his gaze over these pampered and gullible nobles. This event was probably a trigger for a hidden quest where a player's critical thinking was tested. If a player were actually stupid enough to spend sixty silver to play an obviously rigged game, the quest would not trigger and the player would be guaranteed to lose their money.

One noble took out a gray pouch from his pockets that was filled with silver coins. After giving the money to Krusch, he said, "I want this, this, and that!" His expression seemed delirious as sweat dripped down his forehead.

The crowd of nobles followed in succession, taking out their pouches of silver coins to buy the pieces of equipment.

Afterwards, the crowd began appraising the items they selected. Nie Yan fixed his gaze on the three middle-aged nobles in the crowd. Under the cover of the first two, the third middle-aged noble threw a piece of equipment into his bag before taking out another piece of equipment that looked identical to the first. Then, he became shifty-eyed as he ran his gaze over the crowd to assure that the other nobles hadn't noticed. Nie Yan coldly smiled. So, these three are his accomplices.

“Damn, mine's fake.”

“Mine's also fake.”

Many sighs of disappointment could be heard from the crowd of nobles.

After a moment, the middle-aged noble that had exchanged his piece of equipment with another yelled in a pleasantly surprised tone, “Oh my God! Lady Luck is on my side! I actually got the real one, Kars' Golden Necklace! Bless the heavens!”

The nobles all glowed with admiration and rubbed their palms together, anticipating and preparing for the next round of purchases.

“Alright ladies and gentlemen, let's proceed with the remaining two batches. The next item is very precious, the Radiant Gem of Acass! Is everyone ready?!”

Now knowing it was all a scam, Nie Yan considered his next step of action. Should he leave discreetly, or rip apart their lies?

If he chose the latter option and exposed the truth now, he would be offending all of the nobles who were present by revealing their foolishness. That was tantamount to trying to be clever only to end up with egg on one's face.

Chapter 128 – Eye of Truth

Whether or not he should go up and expose this swindler was a dilemma worth contemplating over. Nie Yan couldn't resolve it simply by relying on emotion and impulse, but rather, he needed to analyze it with logic and reason. Just what were the intentions of this quest's designer?

While pondering, he happened to glance over his own character information and noticed a new status effect—Administrator Kallan's Referral.

Administrator Kallan's Referral: Increases Influence in Hilderlocke by 30 points. Duration: 30 minutes.

He immediately came to a decision upon seeing this.

During the thirty minutes Administrator Kallan's Referral was active, his Influence in Hilderlocke would reach a staggering thirty-seven points, more than enough to deal with these common nobles.

If I successfully trigger and complete this hidden quest, I might be able to obtain a decent reward. On the other hand... if I fail, then I should still be able to get out without any problems as long as I leave the city walls within thirty minutes.

After determining his plan, he began walking over to Krusch.

He would be a rash fool if he simply announced to all the nobles in the room that Krusch was swindling them. Instead of believing him, these arrogant nobles would probably mob him to death. He was a genuine human being, not some NPC with preprogrammed behavioural patterns. It would be disgraceful for him to fail at such an important juncture.

“Greetings Master Blacksmith Krusch, I was referred here by Administrator Kallan. He sends you his regards,” Nie Yan said as he approached Krusch.

Whispers could be heard among the crowd after hearing Administrator Kallan’s name. None of the nobles dared to be presumptuous in front of someone who had such a backing. Administrators were important dignitaries of the government in charge of a city’s finance and taxes, government and army, law and order, and so forth. They held absolute authority in their respective city. At the very least, they would be a duke in the ranks of nobility. Yet of the nobles currently present, the highest were no more than earls.

Seeing Nie Yan stepping forward, all of the nobles silently took a step back.

Krusch’s narrow eyes lit up, revealing a proud expression as they swept over the crowd.

“Please send my regards to Administrator Kallan and thank him for his care and kindness. Sir, would you also like to give your luck a try? There are twenty identical items here, but only one of them is the genuine Radiant Gem of Acass. If you pick out the real one,

then this legendary item will be yours to own,” Krusch said with a smile.

Nie Yan glanced at the gems on the table. They looked identical to each other as if they had come from the same mold. They were truly dazzling and beautiful to behold.

“A master’s workmanship is really a cut above the rest,” Nie Yan praised.

Krusch faintly smiled before revealing a haughty expression. He seemed quite pleased at the quality of his counterfeits.

“These fakes really do resemble the real thing, but I can still tell that they have some flaws. Just like when a piece of ice is placed next to a gemstone, although both are similarly dazzling to the eye, the ice cube will melt under the sunlight while the gemstone will remain as dazzling as before,” Nie Yan said in a thoughtful manner. He was planning to slowly draw Krusch into his trap. NPCs were merely AI created by the game developers, hence they had set behaviours, manners of speech, and so on. As long as the player took things slowly, it would be fairly easy to discover their flaws.

Sure enough, as soon as he spoke out these words of provocation, Krusch’s expression gradually turned cold.

“Nirvana Flame, sir, your claims are quite bold. If that’s the case, then please guide us in pointing out which one is real,” Krusch said in an indignant tone. He knew for certain that Nie Yan would be

unable to find the real one.

“Master Blacksmith Krusch, how about we make a little bet?

“What kind of bet?” Krusch coldly asked.

“It’s fairly simple. From these twenty gems, I’ll single out the real Radiant Gem of Acass. If I fail, then the title deed to the property in my hands will be yours. However, I can only be certain if you allow me to carefully inspect each and every gem,” Nie Yan explained. His motive was simple, to expose this swindler. Naturally, since the opponent was a swindler, he never believed they would honour the bet in the first place.

“Fine, I agree to the bet. If I lose, I’ll give you an amount of gold equal to the value of that deed in your hands. How does that sound?” Krusch exposed a greedy expression after peeking at the details of the deed.

Nie Yan had formulated a plan and created a trap for Krusch after more or less figuring out how the events of this quest should progress, and almost immediately, Krusch had foolishly stepped into that trap.

“Master Blacksmith Krusch, allow me to inspect these gems. I trust with your reputation, you’ll do nothing to interfere, right?”

Krusch coldly snorted before taking a step back.

The nobles crowded around the table, leaving about a two-meter gap, and inquisitively stared at Nie Yan. They wondered just how this youngster would be able to determine which gem was the real one.

Noticing their reactions, Nie Yan confirmed that he had indeed taken the correct course of action to progress this quest. He then picked up one of the gems and began examining it in a very thoughtful and earnest manner.

“Clumsy craftsmanship, the Radiant Gem of Acass possesses a pure and bright radiance, yet this one is muddled and dull. This definitely isn’t the real Radiant Gem of Acass. Am I right, Master Blacksmith Krusch?” Nie Yan asked as he turned to Krusch who was standing among the crowd. Truthfully, he had no way of distinguishing real from fake, but he still spoke in a smooth and unhurried fashion.

Krusch snorted again and turned his head away.

“Master Blacksmith Krusch, I’ve already learned an appraisal skill. Will you allow me to appraise this gem to confirm my judgement?” Nie Yan inquired with a smile.

Almost as if guided by a script, the crowd began clamoring and shouting, imploring Krusch that he should allow Nie Yan to appraise the gem.

Unable to refuse, Krusch could only remain silent.

Nie Yan appraised the gem with Transcendent Insight. Almost instantly, with a brilliant flash of light, the item's properties were revealed.

Counterfeit Gem (Fake)

Properties: None

Afterward, he handed the gem over to one of the nobles within the crowd who, after observing it, gave it to the noble next to him.

“He was right. This really is a fake!”

“Too amazing... It looks just like the real thing. How was he able to figure it out?”

“Alright, let's move on to the next one.” Nie Yan faintly smiled as he picked up another gem from the table. He then put on an act of thoroughly examining it before shaking his head in a disappointed manner. “This one's no good either. There are minute blemishes on the edges of the gem. The Radiant Gem of Acass has no such flaws. This gem taints the name of the legendary gem by simply existing! This one is a counterfeit as well, right?”

Krusch remained silent, making the crowd around him sound all the clearer as they implored Nie Yan to appraise it already.

Hearing their shouts, another brilliant flash of light appeared as

Nie Yan appraised the item. As expected, it was yet another fake.

Counterfeit Gem (Fake)

Properties: None

The crowd stirred into a hushed discussion while the gem was being passed around between them.

Appraising one gem after the other, Nie Yan became even more certain of his suspicions that none of the gems on this table were real. Since it was like this, so long as he gave a believable explanation, he would be able to claim that any gem in his hand was fake.

The number of gems on the table quickly decreased until only three were left.

Another gem was appraised after which Nie Yan shook his head.

All of the previous gems were fake!

However, there were still two gems remaining. The crowd of nobles was watching the conclusion of this event with tense nerves, wide eyes, and expressions of shock.

Nie Yan exposed a smug smile as he picked up one of them. After

putting on an act for so long, he was mentally exhausted as his complexion had long since become ashen.

“There are a few impurities in the center of this gem, and the quality of this material isn’t even on the same level as the Radiant Gem of Acass. Therefore, this one is also a fake!” Nie Yan confidently declared as he stared at Krusch.

He then began the process of appraising once again.

The crowd focused their attention on the gem in Nie Yan’s hands. This was already the nineteenth gem. If it also turned out to be a fake, then the remaining one had to be real, right?

The brilliant light of the appraisal skill enshrouded the gem before it began emitting a rainbow-coloured radiance.

However, despite the pretty light show, the outcome of this appraisal was already predetermined.

This gem was yet another fake!

The numerous nobles all let out muffled gasps of surprise and expressed their deep admiration for this young man’s ability.

Nie Yan stared at Master Blacksmith Krusch before picking up the final gem. In that moment, Krusch’s expression became a little panicky and he began slinking towards the door.

“Master Blacksmith Krusch, you aren’t thinking of reneging on our bet, are you? Or could it be that you’re simply trying to run?” Nie Yan asked with a cold smile. He finally had him cornered!

Krusch awkwardly smiled and let out a dry laugh. All of the nobles in the room now had their attention fixed on him. He wouldn’t be able to leave even if he wanted to.

“Master Blacksmith Krusch, or should I just say Mr. Krusch? This final gem in my hand should be real, right? However... why is the workmanship on it so poor? In fact, with a single glance, I can already determine that this one is also a fake!” Nie Yan coldly smiled as he stared at Krusch before appraising the final gem in his hand. After a flash of brilliant radiance, its properties were revealed, and just like before, this one was also a fake. He sneered at Krusch and said, “Therefore, Mr. Krusch... you are nothing more than a dirty swindler!”

「System: After appraising 20 Counterfeit Gems, you have received Eye of Truth.」

Nie Yan was stunned as he stared blankly at the system announcement. He couldn’t help but become excited. It’s actually the Eye of Truth skill!

In the meantime, the crowd of nobles stared blankly for quite a while, seemingly unable to accept the truth.

At that moment, Krusch and his three accomplices bolted for the door.

“Stop them! They all colluded together to swindle you!” Nie Yan pointed at Krusch and the three middle-aged men.

Awakened from their stupor, the crowd quickly reacted and rushed after the four criminals. Very soon, they were caught, bound, and then thrown to the floor.

“We have to take these swindlers to Administrator Kallan and make them face trial!”

“Right, we need to punish these bastards and take back our money!”

The crowd of nobles loudly shouted and cursed as they brought the four over to the administrator’s office.

Nie Yan thought for a moment before deciding he would follow behind. Since he had progressed this far into the quest and managed to expose Krusch, then he would definitely be able to obtain some sort of reward. Administrator Kallan had only mentioned Krusch offhandedly. Never did he expect that it would lead to a quest to uncovering Krusch’s scam.

An outraged crowd of nobles entered the administrator’s office with Nie Yan casually following from the rear. That was the best

spot for him to try out his new skill.

He examined Eye of Truth's information.

Eye of Truth (Instant Cast): After activating this ability, there's a certain probability of seeing through disguises and stealth. The success of this skill depends on the level difference between the player and their target. Cooldown: 120 seconds.

If Nie Yan activated the skill against an equal level Thief, he would have a sixty percent chance of seeing through their stealth. Not to mention some players and monsters also had the ability to disguise their appearance or create illusions such as clones. Although these were formidable deceptive abilities, he had a certain chance of seeing through them as well.

This skill was extremely useful and ranked near the top out of the numerous support type skills. It held an enormous restraining effect on professions similar to the Thief, and it was very useful while doing quests as well.

Chapter 129 – Solitary Wanderer's Leather Armour

Nie Yan followed the crowd of nobles as they marched into the administrator's office. Here, they found Administrator Kallan to whom they began to express their dissatisfaction and outrage, turning the formerly quiet hall into a place of clamour.

“Administrator Kallan, we've caught swindlers!”

“Krusch was scamming us this whole time!”

An outraged noble emotionally walked up to the tied-up Krusch, grabbed ahold of his long flowing beard, and tugged at it to vent some of his anger. Surprisingly, the beard along with a mask came off, revealing a shifty-eyed, fair-faced young man in his twenties. This Krusch was never an old man to begin with!

“Wait, he's not Master Blacksmith Krusch! I've seen his face somewhere before. He's that thief!” the noble exclaimed in shock as he came to a sudden realization. “He isn't Krusch! This guy is just pretending to be him!”

“So, it all makes sense then... Master Blacksmith Krusch has always been a kind and respectable fellow after all. Everything he creates is of high-quality and sells for a premium in auction houses across the empire. Among his creations, there's no lack of Legendary-grade equipment. I should've known there was no way he would run such a shameless scam!”

“So he was actually an imposter...” The nobles finally understood.

“You wretched bastard!” The crowd began beating up the fake Krusch who started to wail and beg for forgiveness.

Administrator Kallan was incensed as well. He pointed at the young man writhing on the floor and shouted, “You wretched cur! Because of you, not only has Hilderlocke received a vile mark on its reputation, but you’ve also sullied Master Blacksmith Krusch’s good name! Your actions are absolutely unforgivable. Guards, send them to jail!”

Afterward, two fully armed guards came forward, apprehended the young man and his three accomplices, and then escorted them away.

“Administrator Kallan, it was this young gentleman who uncovered that swindler’s dastardly plot!” an old noble said as he pointed to Nie Yan.

Following which the crowd began expressing their admiration and praise.

Administrator Kallan’s expression revealed a hint of surprise as he walked over to Nie Yan and said, “Youngster, thank you for exposing that impostor and redeeming Hilderlocke’s reputation. I will make sure those four are punished to the full extent of my authority. And to you, on behalf of all the residents of this city, I

would like to express my deepest gratitude. Your foresight and judgement are very admirable. Please take this as a token of our appreciation.”

You have successfully completed the quest, “Exposing the Imposter Master Blacksmith Krusch.”

You have received 38,297 experience points.

Your Influence in Hilderlocke has increased by 13 points.

Your Intelligence has increased by 20 points.

You have received Solitary Wanderer’s Leather Armour.

These quest rewards are pretty good! Nie Yan glanced at his experience bar and noticed it had already risen to twenty-three percent. Moreover, since his Influence had now reached twenty points, he would be able to receive preferential treatment in this city. How could he not feel happy over such a development? As for the twenty-point increase in Intelligence, although it didn’t have much of an effect for Thieves, it still had some influence on the success rate of the Lockpicking skill. Not to mention it would also be useful when he wanted to use special scrolls that had Intelligence requirements.

Afterward, he took the leather armour in his hands and examined its properties.

Solitary Wanderer's Leather Armour (Gold)

Requirements: Level 10

Properties: Defense 51-57, Resilience +9, Awareness +15, Dexterity +13

Weight: 5 lb

Restrictions: Thief; can be equipped by all factions.

In the current progression of the game, rewards like this piece of Gold-grade equipment were already quite generous. Even in the hardest dungeon available right now, Sosil Valley, unless a team was running it on Specialist, it was fairly rare for Gold-grade equipment to drop. The many rewards, as well as the Eye of Truth skill, left him feeling very satisfied.

After putting the armour on, Nie Yan began admiring its light blue colour and sleek design, which made him feel as if he were nimbler by simply wearing it.

He then walked around in all directions in order to get used to the sensation of wearing it.

Hmm... not bad.

“Thank you for your generosity, Administrator Kallan,” Nie Yan smiled as he expressed his gratitude.

Since he had no more business here, he expressed his thanks once more before leaving Administrator Kallan's office. While walking out of the building, he felt his mood was much improved from when he had first arrived. Despite having a sudden quest being thrown at him, he had managed to adapt fairly well. Moreover, a hint of his old questing rhythm and game sense seemed to have returned. In his past life, he had relied on this combination of know-how to gradually catch up from being a minor character to becoming an elite player himself.

However, the one gold transfer fee for his return trip still made his heart ache a bit. "Hah... I really shouldn't travel to other cities too much this early on. Still, this trip to Hilderlocke was quite fruitful..." Nie Yan faintly smiled while muttering to himself.

Having stepped out of the transfer point in Calore, his thoughts drifted to Gato the Lion King and the Ogre Devourer which both should have respawned by now. However, at his present level, it wasn't really worthwhile to farm them anymore. The little experience he'd receive wouldn't make up for the time spent killing them, and the equipment they dropped no longer caught his eye.

As he pondered on his next move, the Steal skill that he obtained from Sulgata's Boots came to mind. There was a suitable quest at this early stage of the game which made the skill's usage almost a necessity. After such a long time, he no longer remembered the exact details of the quest; however, he knew that aside from the Steal skill he would also require Tang Yao's cooperation. Unfortunately, Tang Yao was still training in Hems, so he would have no choice but to put it off for now.

In the end, Nie Yan decided he would go off and train in a Level 10 zone. As for the zones that were suitable for his level, there was no place better than Black Gold Mines. The Level 10 Leader-class Zombies there gave relatively high experience and dropped good items, including several pieces of Level 10 Thief Equipment. On top of that, there were also numerous gems and ores for the pickings that he could sell for a favourable price.

The current level of his gear was simply too low, and it would be hard for him to find Level 10 equipment in the marketplace at present. The high-level players able to find Level 10 equipment generally wouldn't sell them, as they would rather exchange with other players because they themselves lacked Level 10 equipment as well. Thus, it wasn't a bad idea for him to go over there and check it out. After all, he knew the general locations of every Leader, Sub-Elite, and even Elite monster that spawned there.

While preparing to set out for this trip, he realized he should also use this opportunity to restock on Flash Powder and other items. Hence, he headed over to Trembling Milo's where he bought Flash Powder, Web Scrolls, and Sheep Transformation Scrolls which were all very effective against monsters of Level 10 and lower.

Once he completed his preparations, he exited the city gates and activated a Haste Scroll and Shadow Dance before dashing off toward Black Gold Mines. The thirty-point increase in movement speed from Shadow Dance combined with the Haste Scroll made him seem like the wind as he rapidly flitted across the path within the forest.

Ten or so minutes later, he exited the forest and was greeted by the sight of black mountains stretching out as far as the eye could see. This was Black Gold Mines. In about half-a-month's time, various guilds would send their mining teams, consisting of both escorts and Miners, here. This was effectively killing two birds with one stone, since the escorts would be able train here by clearing out the surrounding monsters while the Miners would be free to mine for gems and ores. Despite the surrounding Zombies, mining in this location was quite profitable. In a single day, a Junior Miner would be able to earn approximately two silver. However, at present, there was not a single trace of player activity.

Nie Yan ran across the rocky surface and leaped onto a large boulder where he perched and muttered to himself.

“If I remember correctly, it should be somewhere in the east, but dammit, I forgot the exact location...” Nonetheless, he had trained here for quite a while in his past life, so he still had some vague impressions of this place. After a short while and coming across several familiar landmarks, he spotted a group of roaming Zombie Miners.

Zombie Miner: Level 10

Health: 560/560

Unwilling to waste his time on these ordinary Zombie Miners, he quickly moved on. After searching for five or six minutes, he finally spotted another group of Zombies. This group was nearly identical in appearance to the first save for a lone Zombie a good

distance away that appeared much bulkier and larger than the others. It had a large black metal plate on its back, and the common Zombies nearby seemed much sharper.

Nie Yan inspected this Zombie with Transcendent Insight.

Zombie Foreman (Leader): Level 10

Health: 1600/1600

This was his target! Nie Yan entered stealth and began slowly making his way toward the Zombie Foreman's back who was completely unaware of his approach. With the bonuses from the Chapter of Freedom, Sulgata's Boots, and his other gear, his present stealth ability, having reached a terrifying level, was most likely unrivalled. Even if the Zombie Foreman were five levels higher, it would still be unable to sense his approach.

After getting into attack range, Nie Yan exploded forth as Blood Pact's blade coldly streaked toward the back of the Zombie Foreman's head.

Smothering Strike!

He then took advantage of its dazed state and struck it with Assassinate followed by Vital Strike.

Impressive damage values rose up above the Zombie Foreman's head. After suffering his surprise attack, the Zombie Foreman spun around and furiously clawed at him with its razor-sharp nails.

Having been in Abraham's Tomb before, where he faced similar attacks, Nie Yan was well-aware of how terrifying these claw strikes could be, especially when it was from a Level 25 Vampire Baron. If he was even struck once, he would probably lose the greater half of his health. Comparatively, this Level 10 Zombie Foreman was no more threatening than an equal level Warrior with decent gear.

Nie Yan sidestepped the attack as a bloody claw streaked past his previous position before countering with Concussive Blow, dazing the Zombie Foreman once more. After which he took advantage of the time to circle around and lash out with Backstab and Eviscerate, chunking the Zombie Foreman for another 200 health.

After losing more than half of its health in a short period of time, the Zombie Foreman's skin began transforming into an odd shade of red before exuding a faint bloody mist.

This was the Zombie Foreman's ability, Plague. If a player foolishly came into contact with this mist, they would lose at least 20 health every second. Unless a Priest who could cast Lesser Heal and Dispel was on hand, that player would gradually lose more and more health until they died!

This was also the reason why it required the cooperation of

multiple players when taking on an equal level Leader-class monster. The few who were able to overcome such obstacles and solo these monsters were existences that were already overpowered to a perverse degree.

Nie Yan activated Swift Retreat and disengaged from the melee. He then pulled out a Web Scroll from his bag and activated it upon which a giant net of webbing entrapped the Zombie Foreman, leaving it unable to budge an inch.

After which he pulled out his crossbow and fired off a volley of bolts.

「Put! Put! Put!」

-21, -23, -21...

A string of damage values rose up above the Zombie Foreman's head.

The Zombie Foreman incessantly struggled before finally breaking free and charging toward Nie Yan. Just as it was about to reach him, he retrieved a pouch of Flash Powder from his bag and lobbed it at the Zombie Foreman's eyes.「Poof!」The bag exploded into a cloud of blinding glitter.

Taken aback by the sudden loss of vision, the Zombie Foreman let out a blood-curdling roar and clawed wildly at its surroundings, leaving visible marks on the nearby walls and boulders.

Nie Yan took advantage of the opportunity to retreat ten meters where he unceasingly fired out volley after volley of crossbow bolts. As the Zombie Foreman's health approached zero, with a wobbly stagger and mournful moan, it finally collapsed, falling face first on the ground.

"It's done." Nie Yan faintly smiled. Although the Zombie Foreman had over fifteen hundred health, he was able to make short work of it without even breaking a sweat. He walked over to the Zombie Foreman and bent down to pick up the item that dropped. It was a piece of Silver equipment, a pity that it wasn't for a Thief. He got back up and then headed off to his next target.

Chapter 130 – Collaboration

When Nie Yan levelled in Black Gold Mines in his past life, he had required the cooperation of at least three other Level 10 or higher players, including both a tank and healer, to be able to bring down a single Zombie Foreman.

This time around, he hadn't only come here to level, but also to try his luck at finding some decent Silver-grade equipment. Generally, Level 10 Silver-grade equipment would be slightly worse off in terms of stats to Level 5 Gold-grade equipment. If he were able to snag a piece of Level 10 Gold-grade equipment, then it would be even better. In addition, if equipment for other classes dropped, he would be able to sell each piece in the auction house for a sizable profit.

After three hours or so of exploring the wide open rocky terrain of the mines, he managed to kill sixteen Zombie Foremen. From them, he was able to obtain a few decent items: several gems that he could sell for a good price and the fairly uncommon Berserk Pill Recipe. While moving around this area, he had also encountered two groups of players training in the area, both of which he took a long detour around since he couldn't be bothered to deal with the hassle if a conflict were to arise.

As he sat down to recover his stamina, he opened up the notification window for his shop. After a quick glance, he could tell the shop was gradually going on the right track while under Bird's supervision. Over the past few hours, he managed to hire over thirty Alchemists, who one after the other began producing goods. In this fashion, the variety of goods for sale in the shop gradually grew, so much so that even the Junior Magic Resonance Potion

was already available for purchase.

While managing a potion shop, simply lowering the price of goods didn't necessarily mean customers would flock over. Common consumables, for instance, Anti-Paralysis Potions, Antidotes, and so on, wouldn't earn the shop much money. Since these items were readily available everywhere, it was hard to sell them for a good profit, and a business couldn't simply raise their prices and expect players to still purchase from them. As for the comparatively uncommon items such as Magic Resonance Potions, Berserk Pills, etc... since their recipes were fairly hard to find, as long as the shop produced high-quality products while other shops couldn't keep up in quantity, they would be able to see money flow in. Even if the prices of these items were set a little high, as long as they could afford it, players would nevertheless come to the shop to buy them.

The tactic of lowering your own prices to undercut the competition so you can attract customers was a foolish business practice. You would be purposefully lowering your own profits! In Conviction, the only way for a business to stand out was to procure and sell goods that weren't available in other shops! That way, as long as these items were readily available, even if you didn't want your shop's popularity to explode, it would do so anyways.

Nie Yan examined a breakdown of the shop's sales. For now, Black Phenol and Black Phenol Recipes were still the best selling items. In the last few hours that he hadn't checked up on it, the shop even managed to earn yet another twenty-five gold. Unfortunately, this sort of momentum would soon come to an abrupt halt because of his quickly dwindling stock. However, with the new potions and pills as a base, attracting a great amount of

player attention, there was nevertheless still quite a bit of money to be made in the days to come.

Since the shop seemed to be doing fine on its own, Nie Yan stood up and continued seeking out Zombie Foremen.

During the time spent exploring the area, what seemed to puzzle him most was that he had yet to encounter a Sub-Elite Zombie. Although there was no guarantee, there was at least a good chance of him bringing one down.

And so, he spent the whole day training in the mines. By the time he went offline, he had filled up his experience bar by 57%, and his bag was filled with all sorts of items.

Back in the real world, Nie Yan spent the whole day at home studying and tempering his body. He was able to bring out his potential as a shut-in to its absolute peak. However, this was all for the sake of breaking out into prominence in the future while the foundations he laid in the game slowly grew.

While looking at the calendar, he recalled that this should be around the time when his parents would return. Just the thought of being able to see their faces once more made him feel quite sentimental.

As all the tragedies of the past involuntarily flooded his mind, he was overtaken by a mini panic attack. These memories were simply too much, and it took him a long while before he was finally able to calm down. Focus on the more important matters at

hand, then deal with the rest later... he calmly reminded himself.

Time seemed to quickly fly by as he spent two days hunting Zombie Foremen in Black Gold Mines. On the third day, he finally hit Level 11.

“It’s about time I head back,” Nie Yan muttered as he looked in his bag. It was now filled to the brim with pieces of equipment. Almost all of them were Silver-grade save for one, a piece of Gold-grade Warrior equipment. He also saw the large quantity of ores, gems, and other miscellaneous items. At present, these ores and gems would fetch a good price on the marketplace, but if he waited for the playerbase to rise in level, then they would gradually diminish in value. Last but not least, he also found three recipes, two Berserk Pill Recipes and an Intermediate Health Potion Recipe.

Intermediate Health Potions were still quite rare as they had yet to appear on the marketplace. If he were to offer them up for sale in his shop, he imagined the players would probably go frantic over them.

Two days ago, Medusa’s Lair finally opened, and the demand for Anti-Petrify Potions rose accordingly, causing their price to skyrocket before finally stabilising at five times its original price. Under Nie Yan’s guidance, Bird placed all of their Anti-Petrify Potions up for sale. Even though the demand wasn’t as explosive as the Black Phenol had been at its peak, they would still be able to make a considerable profit.

According to Bird, business was booming. Every day, an endless stream of players would flood into the shop to purchase potions,

pills, and other goods. The shop was doing very well, so much so that its employees couldn't keep up with all the customers, leading Bird to hire an additional two clerks to help with the influx, with Nie Yan's permission of course.

Since business was so fiery, the Alchemists on the second floor were invigorated and exerted their uttermost effort in producing concoctions. For every concoction they produced and sold, they would be able to receive their share of the profits immediately. This form of encouragement proved to be extremely effective. They were practically producing concoctions nonstop as a steady flow of goods went down to the first floor. Since most of the items the shop sold were high-end potions, pills, and such, the earnings were equally astonishing. They were even making more than those Alchemists from the major guilds who received a twenty percent share.

Furthermore, following Nie Yan's instructions, Bird spent an entire two gold to purchase several recipes for high-level concoctions along with the ingredients required to produce them. Thanks to this, the several Junior Alchemists under him were rapidly improving their Alchemy skill. Both Quiet Nannan and Still Grieving were close to advancing to Intermediate Alchemists while Bird had at long last achieved his dream of becoming a Junior Alchemist.

With such promising talents under him, his future prospects were limitless, not to mention the many more Alchemists that would be joining in the near future.

If he managed to get a hold of Calore's market, Nie Yan planned

to expand and open potion shops in other cities in the future as well. However, in order to do so, he would need to gain the support of at least one of the major figures in those cities. Otherwise, if someone pulled an underhanded trick, it would negatively influence his business. If not that, he would need to gain at least thirty points of Influence in the city he wished to expand to, because then, very few entities would be able to take action against him.

「Your friend's business is doing pretty well,」Nie Yan suddenly received a message from Sleepy Fox.

「Yeah, the Starry Night Potion Shop took a step on the right track,」Nie Yan replied. Sleepy Fox finally took the initiative to contact him after all this time. With the shop's popularity being as explosive as it was, it would be a real wonder if he managed to restrain himself any longer. He felt certain Sleepy Fox was seeking him out to find out some behind-the-scenes information about the shop. This was the perfect timing to raise the matter of collaboration.

「I've heard they hired many Junior Alchemists. I was wondering if they could secure me a batch of Flamescorch Potions. Can you help me ask?」Sleepy Fox asked.

「Flamescorch Potions? Don't you have Alchemists over on your side? 」Nie Yan asked, sounding a bit puzzled. This was a little unexpected. Sleepy Fox was actually contacting him to purchase potions.

「Sigh... don't bring that up. My guild only has twenty

Alchemists, and only two of them have advanced to Junior Alchemists. Earlier, I was in contact with several Junior Alchemists and invited them to work for my guild, but they kept playing wait and see. Just when we were negotiating salary, their cut of the profits, and so on, the Starry Night Potion Shop started hiring, and they all ran off there instead. The few potions and pills my Alchemists make definitely aren't enough to keep up with the demand...」Sleepy Fox bitterly explained.

Nie Yan never expected for such a situation to occur, though a moment later, he broke into a faint smile. This was also a good illustration of the Starry Night Potion Shop's allure. While the benefits of joining a guild were obvious, it came at the cost of the Alchemist's freedom. From then on, they would have to satisfy the requests of their guild members before they could freely concoct on their own. If a guild member wanted a certain potion or pill, then they would be forced to create it. Even after advancing to the more prestigious rank of Junior Alchemist, they would still be made to produce simple low-level concoctions. Hence, the free time of a guild Alchemist was extremely limited. Then came in the Starry Night Potion Shop, a revolutionary business that turned convention over its head and catered primarily to high-end players. It was a place where they would be able to rapidly improve their Alchemy skill, and although they wouldn't receive as high of a cut, the quantity of goods they would produce and sell more than made up for this discrepancy, earning them much more than they would in a guild. Not to mention as an owner that would spend two gold to purchase high-quality ingredients for their subordinates to quickly improve, something which was rarely if ever seen, Nie Yan had effectively captured the hearts of all of Calore's Alchemists in one fell swoop.

「My friend was wondering if you'd like to collaborate with him.」

「What kind of collaboration?」Sleepy Fox asked in surprise.

「The Starry Night Potion Shop will purchase Alchemy ingredients from you at market rate. In exchange, you can't sell them to others. However, you'll have priority over others when buying goods from them, and depending on how much you purchase, you'll receive upwards of a 10% discount.」

「So it was like this...」Sleepy Fox suddenly understood. The Starry Night Potion Shop was looking for a supplier to provide them with raw materials and ingredients. This was to ensure stability so that they wouldn't be subjected to the fluctuations of the auction house. As for what this deal entailed for him, there were really no downsides. Hence, he nodded and said,「Sounds good, I'm willing to collaborate...」

「Head over to the Starry Night Potion Shop and look for a player named Bird Leaves No Eggs. He'll handle everything and explain the details of the collaboration with you. As for the Flamescorch Potions, just hand the ingredients for it over to Bird, and he'll handle the rest,」Nie Yan replied.

「Alright.」

Nie Yan hung up the call. Having settled this matter, his mind was free of one more worry.

「How are things on your side?」Nie Yan sent a message to Tang Yao.

「My Arcane Fairy reached Rank 3 two days ago. I think I'm going to stay here for another hour before heading back,」Tang Yao replied. Then he continued in an excited tone,「Levelling here really is amazing! All I have to do is cast magic nonstop, and I'll see my experience bar fill up like crazy! I really want to stay here until I'm Level 11 or 12!」

「Hurry back when you hit Level 10. We still have some important things to do.」Nie Yan felt a sense of indescribable excitement in his heart. If they were able to complete the next quest together, then both of their levels and the quality of their gear would improve by a large margin again.

「What are we going to do?」Tang Yao asked in surprise.

「A quest.」

「Sure!」Taking on a quest together with Nie Yan, that was what he had been looking forward to the most!

Chapter 131 – Encounter

After returning to the city, Nie Yan planned to head to the auction house and get rid of all the equipment in his bag. His bag only had seven spaces left and would be completely full if he randomly chucked in a few more items. He stood up and was prepared to begin channeling a Return Scroll.

However, a deep muffled roar cut through the air as it reverberated from the distance. He halted for a moment before putting away the scroll in his hand. This roar, it's from a Sub-Elite Zombie or possibly... an Elite Zombie King! Reigning over a certain region of space, these monsters would occasionally roar to announce their presence to potential intruders. As for weak players, this was a sign that they should depart the area immediately.

After killing countless Leader-class monsters over the course of two days, he was finally going to meet a truly strong opponent.

He headed toward the source of the sound. After passing through a mound of rubble, he entered a wide open area and was greeted by the sight of an enormous Zombie. Towering over its surroundings, it was three meters tall and entirely pitch-black in colour while a fishy-smelling pus oozed out of its body. Its nails were extremely long and sharp, resembling steel swords. Even more odd was the dark scarlet aura that faintly enshrouded it.

He activated Transcendent Insight.

Zombie King (Elite): Level 10

Health: 3,200/3,200

“It’s an Elite!” Nie Yan muttered as he surveyed the terrain for features he could take advantage of, causing his eyes to fall on the scattered mounds of rocks. “Sigh... killing this guy shouldn’t be a problem, but I’ll have to use my Flash Powder, Web Scrolls, and Sheep Transformation Scrolls.” His heart ached at the thought of how expensive each one was. “But... the items it drops should cover the costs!” He faintly smiled before leaping onto a large boulder where he retrieved his crossbow and took aim. 「Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!」 Three bolts flew in a straight line towards the Zombie King.

「Put! Put! Put!」 All of the bolts struck the Zombie King in the back.

-13, -12, -15

The Zombie King angrily roared as it turned around and searched for its aggressor among the mounds of rocks.

Nie Yan turned tail and fled toward the cover of the scattered mounds while firing bolts non-stop from his Crossbow of Blood. I’ll wear it down with ranged attacks first.

The Zombie King furiously clawed at its surroundings while seeking out Nie Yan, sending rubble flying everywhere as it quickly closed in on him.

「Poof!」Just as the Zombie King was about to reach him, he lobbed a pouch of Flash Powder which promptly exploded upon impact with its eyes.

The cloud of dazzling powder temporarily blinded the Zombie King as it let out a roar of anguish from the intense burning sensation in its eyes.

Seeing the Zombie King helplessly flailing around, Nie Yan faintly smiled before circling behind and attacking it with Eviscerate followed by Lacerate. The two skills dealt 120 damage, and afterward, it was struck by the bleed status effect which caused it to lose 10 health every second.

The blinding effect from Flash Powder would only last for so long. In fact, against an Elite monster, he would be lucky if it lasted more than a few seconds. Hence, after finishing his combo, he activated Swift Retreat and quickly withdrew from melee range. Having created some distance, he glanced at the Zombie King's health bar. The bleed damage from Eviscerate and Lacerate was quite potent and would gradually accumulate with each passing second.

He took a stance and resumed firing crossbow bolts. Against an equal level opponent, he received no negative modifiers; thus, the damage he dealt was fairly significant.

Soon after regaining its vision, the Zombie King charged after him again. However, just as it was about to reach him, he crushed

the Web Scroll he had prepared beforehand, whereupon a giant spider web emerged out of thin air and firmly bound it in place.

He then dashed toward the Zombie King and leaped into the air before stabbing it in the neck with Vital Strike. After gracefully landing on the ground, he circled behind it and used Backstab to plunge his dagger deep into its spine.

After two more attacks, he didn't dare to stick around any longer and quickly created some distance again. Just like before, he retrieved his crossbow and began peppering it with bolts.

With his pitiful health and weak leather armour, he wouldn't be able to endure even a single strike from such a monster. Normally, an Elite monster like the Zombie King required a team of five or more players to effectively bring it down. Of the members in the team, a strong healer and a powerful tank were an absolute necessity, as well as having all members carry several Antidotes; otherwise, if they were struck by the acute poison in the Zombie King's claws, they would lose 30 health every second until either the player died or the poison was cured. As such, Nie Yan had to take extreme caution in avoiding the Zombie King's attacks.

The battle between them persisted as the Zombie King's health was gradually being chipped away. Even now, it was still unable to land even a single hit. He had effectively sealed off all methods for it to attack. No matter how angry it got, its struggling was futile in the end.

“I think the sound came from there.”

“Let’s go over and take a look.”

A party of three arrived near the mounds of rocks where Nie Yan and the Zombie King were battling. They were all members of Victorious Return, and as players who could level in Black Gold Mines at this stage of the game, they definitely weren’t simple. In fact, among their guild’s ranks, they were considered the *crème de la crème*.

The party consisted of a Battle Thief, Berserker, and female Arcane Mage. They were farming mobs relatively close by when they heard roars, so they rushed over to check out what was going on.

“Night Shadow, hurry up! Go take a look at what’s happening,” the Berserker called out to the Battle Thief.

“Fine, fine, I’m going! Sigh, why do I always have to do the tedious work...” Night Shadow replied in a begrudging manner. Of course, if he didn’t want to scout, who told him to pick a Thief? As one of the nimbler classes, they were twenty percent faster than Warriors on average, and this was without taking skills into account. Hence, there was no one more suited than him for scouting up ahead.

Haste!

Night Shadow suddenly became much faster, leaving after-images behind him as he dashed toward the source of the sounds.

“I think there’s an Elite up ahead. Tangerine, if it really is one, Night Shadow and I will draw its aggro, then the rest will be up to you,” the Berserker instructed. As a Berserker, tanking an Elite-class Zombie would be rather difficult. Fortunately, he had learned a new skill, Life Actuation, which had a 20-minute duration, 2-day cooldown, and improved his survivability significantly. With it, it was possible for him to endure an Elite-class Zombie’s hits.

“Should we ask the guild leader to send a Priest over? An Elite Zombie seems like a very hard monster to deal with,” Tangerine asked while knitting her elegant brows. She had an average appearance that couldn’t be regarded as first-rate. However, her status in the guild was nevertheless very high.

“Nah, I think we’ll be fine. Besides, who knows how long it’ll take for a Priest to get here? Can you still cast Arcane Reset?”

“I can, but it has a two-day cooldown... and I still need to run dungeons with the team tomorrow.”

“Forget it then, I guess. Let’s see how it plays out.”

Nie Yan was still whittling away at the Zombie King’s health, which by now had already fallen to twenty percent. Even though everything seemed to progress smoothly, he felt a slight tingling sensation in the back of his mind, warning him of danger. At his present level, his Awareness had already reached a terrifyingly high degree. So, if anything were to occur within his vicinity, he would be able sense it fairly quickly. Immediately, he pulled out

another Web Scroll and activated it, causing a giant spider web to emerge out of thin air and fall over the Zombie King, leaving it temporarily immobilized.

Earlier, Night Shadow had arrived in the area and was observing the scene from a distance with an expression of indescribable shock. He, Tangerine, and Hidden Blade were regarded as prominent figures in Victorious Return. Even if they weren't in the top ten, they were at least among the twenty best players in the guild. However, as elites belonging to the prestigious Victorious Return, they were repeatedly hesitating over facing off against an Elite monster. Yet this Thief before his eyes had single-handedly taken out more than eighty percent of an Elite monster's health, and it looked like he was going to kill it soon and without even breaking so much as a sweat! This really was too unfathomable...

After inspecting him, Night Shadow discovered this player was called Nirvana Flame!

It's him!

Night Shadow recalled a certain incident. About a week ago, when their guild was sieging the Fishmen Village, one of their Elementalists, Violet Flame, had been killed by a Thief named Nirvana Flame. Not only that, but he had also managed to easily escape despite being completely surrounded by their members. Afterwards, this event became a huge topic of discussion among their guild members. Even if he wished to forget such a ferocious figure, he still wouldn't be able to!

He never imagined that he would encounter this person here!

As members of Victorious Return, they would always act unbridled without the slightest restraint. If anyone were to even slightly inconvenience them, the entire guild would have them pay back a hundredfold, to say nothing of a player who had safely escaped after killing one of their members and left them with no face!

Night Shadow faintly smiled. If he killed Nie Yan, aside from snatching all the experience and items from the Zombie King for his party, he would also be able to collect on the bounty from his guild! Just what kind of player wouldn't take advantage of such an opportunity!

Besides, the Zombie King was fully aggroed onto Nie Yan!

「Hurry over, I've found a big fish!」Night Shadow excitedly sent out a message to Tangerine and Hidden Blade in the party chat.

“Night Shadow found something. Let's meet up with him,” Hidden Blade said after looking at the chat. After exchanging glances, they both rushed over.

It would be too much of a waste if he were to allow Nie Yan to finish off the Zombie King. So, while Hidden Blade and Tangerine had yet to arrive, Night Shadow entered stealth and gradually approached Nie Yan from the rear. Even as he closed in, his target's back remained completely exposed. Seeing this lack of response from his target, he reaffirmed the quality of his own stealthing ability.

Never did he expect, in the instant he was about to attack, Nie Yan would suddenly turn around.

Eye of Truth!

Nie Yan's eyes became bloodshot as they turned a deep scarlet red and blossomed with a frightening radiance. With Eye of Truth's assistance, he spotted a faint silhouette from the corner of his eye. As it gradually approached, the corner of his mouth curved into a disdainful sneer. You want to sneak attack me? It's not going to be that easy! He spun around and chucked a pouch of Flash Powder directly at the Thief's face.「Poof!」The glittering powder released a dazzling light and completely enshrouded the surrounding area in a bright radiance.

As Night Shadow approached, he suddenly found his target facing him with bloodshot eyes and shining with a unnerving light. It was as if this light could reveal everything, leaving him bare-naked and exposed. He was inwardly alarmed. C-could he have noticed me...?

He then saw a strange pouch appear in Nie Yan's hand, and before he was even able to react, a brilliant radiance blinded him as if a thousand needles were stabbing into his eyes.

S-shit-shit-shit, not good! Night Shadow felt an intense and imminent sense of danger. He quickly pulled back by activating Swift Retreat. However, since the terrain here was rocky and uneven and he had been completely blinded, he lost his footing

after tripping over a rock.

Nonetheless, he was a top expert within his guild for a reason. He quickly realized that his sudden loss of vision was caused by the opponent's item. He regained balance of his body mid fall, and with his right hand as a support, he did a backflip and landed firmly on his feet. Though, in the same instant, he found himself directly staring at the cold edge of a blade.

His opponent's movements were as fast as lightning!

So fast!

As if he had fallen into a pit of despair, Night Shadow gave up all hope of surviving. When faced with such a sharp and decisive attack, it was impossible for him to dodge. Only now did he understand why Nie Yan was able to kill Violet Flame and escape their encirclement unharmed.

Chapter 132 – To Bully Intolerably

Calling Nie Yan fast was an understatement. In one fluid movement, he had thrown the Flash Powder and made his way behind Night Shadow.

Nie Yan knew, from his experience playing as a thief for so many years, exactly which factors would allow him to deal a fatal blow. The first was crowd control, incapacitating the enemy by either stunning, blinding, or doing anything to render them incapable of retaliating in general. The other was speed, speed so astonishingly fast the enemy would be unable to dodge.

After getting behind Night Shadow, Nie Yan stunned him by striking him on the back of the head with Concussive Blow.

Only then did he notice that this Thief actually belonged to Victorious Return. “Tch, it’s them again...” Judging from the style of the dark leather armour he wore, Nie Yan recognized it as the Blackwing Set, the best Battle Thief set currently in the game. “He’s probably ranked pretty highly in their guild.”

However, no matter how big their influence, how skilled they were in battle, or how experienced they were in other VRMMOs, they still wouldn’t be able to compete with him!

As for those who might try to mount a sneak attack against him, Nie Yan absolutely wouldn’t hold back. Though, before he could finish off Night Shadow, a black ball of fire suddenly emerged out of thin air and flew directly towards Nie Yan.

It's an Arcane Flame Burst!

Shit, he has backup! Nie Yan's mind rang out in alarm. If he continued attacking Night Shadow, then he would have to take a scorching explosion to the back. Since his opponent had teammates interfering, even if he hoped to kill Night Shadow right now, such a thing was now nothing more than wishful thinking. He rolled out of the way to avoid the Arcane Flame Burst. Then, in that same moment, he looked toward the source of the spell and saw a female Arcane Mage at the end of her casting animation. Suddenly, while still in mid-roll, he was hit by Demoralizing Shout.

After regaining his footing, he glanced at his status bar and noticed a new debuff: Attack -30%, 20 second duration. With his attack having been reduced to such an extent, he could no longer output enough burst damage to kill Night Shadow even if he wanted to.

This is bad!

Right now, his attack being crippled was the least of his worries. The Zombie King had broken free from its restraints and was charging him from the rear. Meanwhile, a Berserker wearing the Rock Solid Defense Set was rushing at him from another direction.

The Zombie King let out an angry roar as it closed in and slashed at Nie Yan with its bloody claws.

“Let’s see how you’ll get out of this!” Hidden Blade hollered. From his point of view, Nie Yan was already a dead man.

This situation, a three versus one, was quite troublesome for Nie Yan. Plus, from what he saw of their coordination earlier, they wouldn’t be easy opponents to deal with. Adding to that, the Zombie King was fully aggroed onto him. As long as they didn’t accidentally attack it, its aggro would never shift.

He had effectively been cornered!

To make matters worse, the nearby Night Shadow had finally awoken from his dazed state.

“Don’t let him escape! He’s that Nirvana Flame the guild leader told us to hunt down!” Night Shadow exclaimed, still feeling traces of fear. If Tangerine and Hidden Blade hadn’t arrived in a timely manner, then he would have been a goner for sure.

In his last encounter with Victorious Return, Nie Yan had killed Violet Flame who held a high status in the guild as a member of the main dungeon running team. Since every member was quintessential, Violet Flame dropping a level had set back the entire team’s dungeon progression by a day. Not only had he been easily dealt with by a no-name player, but the culprit had also managed to escape! This was no different from the entire guild receiving a ruthless slap to the face! As such, Victorious Return’s guild leader, Heaven Breaker, became extremely aggravated and put a bounty on the culprit’s head. This was Heaven Breaker’s nature. He would follow his ruthless desires without any fear of repercussion and would allow no one to stand in the way of his

plans.

“Gotcha! Don’t worry, there’s no way he can escape.” Hidden Blade charged forward with Vanguard Rush and swung his claymore at Nie Yan.

After suffering the enemy’s ambush, even though he didn’t want the Zombie King to be snatched away by them, he had no choice but to retreat for the time being. Preserving his life always came first; as long as he had his life, he could figure out what to do next later. He activated Shadow Dance and disappeared from their view. Thanks to the speed increase from Shadow Dance, he was able to safely retreat far away.

Hidden Blade never expected Nie Yan would suddenly disappear. By the time he swung his claymore, Nie Yan was already far gone, and so his attack hit nothing but air.

“Be careful, he entered stealth!”

“He’s too fast. I wasn’t able to stop him!” Night Shadow felt extremely nervous. Facing off against an expert like Nie Yan was exciting but dangerous at the same time.

After losing sight of its original target, the Zombie King’s aggro shifted and it charged at the nearest target with the lowest defense, which happened to be Night Shadow.

Taunt!

After pulling the Zombie King's aggro, Hidden Blade activated Life Actuation. Immediately, his health increased by 300, his defense by 36, and his poison resistance by 13, making him durable enough to firmly hold off the Zombie King.

"Be careful. Don't let yourself be ambushed," Night Shadow warned.

"Relax, that Thief might've run off, but this Zombie King will definitely be ours!" Hidden Blade said in a tone full of confidence. In his current state, what sort of tricks could Nie Yan possibly pull?

Generally, a Thief would have no choice but to retreat whenever they came into conflict with a Warrior outside of the city. After all, there was nothing they could do. Warriors had much higher health and defense, so the damage a Thief could deal to them was limited. On the other hand, a Warrior's attacks could easily pierce through a Thief's weak leather armour.

This was also why Thieves usually targeted Mages, who only had cloth garments to protect themselves with.

After activating Life Actuation, Hidden Blade's health, defense, etc., had risen to an all new level. If a Thief attempted to ambush him while he was in this state, they would basically be courting death. This was the privilege of the strong looking down on the weak! Even if he allowed that puny Thief to freely attack for the next fifteen seconds, he still wouldn't be able to leave even a

scratch.

In combat, many things could happen within the span of fifteen seconds. A single Tendon Break, for example, would lead to Nie Yan being completely crippled.

After witnessing Hidden Blade redirecting the aggro onto himself, Night Shadow jumped into the fray as well and aided him in taking down the Zombie King. However, he didn't dare to be as unbridled as Hidden Blade, since even though Nie Yan disappeared without a trace, he might still be lingering around.

Meanwhile, Tangerine was in the rear bombarding the Zombie King with magic. Every spell she cast caused over a hundred damage, sending its health in a downward spiral.

Nie Yan knitted his brows. This Arcane Mage's damage was quite terrifying!

“Drink an Antidote!”

“Give it your all! It's almost dead!” Hidden Blade shouted out in excitement. They were quite lucky this time around since they would be able to reap the rewards of killing an Elite without having to put in much effort.

They were completely unscrupulous, planning to snatch away the Zombie King for themselves.

Nie Yan was infuriated as he watched this. The Zombie King he worked so painstakingly hard to wear down was about to be taken by someone else. He originally wanted to save some of his skills for a particularly hard quest, but now it couldn't be helped since he had encountered something which absolutely couldn't be tolerated!

After glancing at his skill bar, he gradually approached the Arcane Mage. He planned to take her out before doing anything else since her damage was simply too ferocious. Once she was out of the picture, dealing with Night Shadow and Hidden blade would be much easier.

“Tangerine, stay alert,” Night Shadow reminded her. He didn't feel safe knowing that Nie Yan could be lingering around somewhere nearby. He was too strong, even moreso when compared to the several Thieves in their team.

“No need to panic, it's just a Thief. This little lady might not have killed several hundreds of them, but she's certainly killed several dozens!” Tangerine replied in a boastful manner.

Hearing her response, Night Shadow felt his worries subside as he realized they might have been unfounded. After all, Tangerine's skill placed her in the top three of their entire guild. She also had a flawless game sense and the best Arcane Mage equipment currently in the game, which meant that there were very few players capable of rivalling her.

“Still, it's best if we remain on guard. He has some really strange skills, so watch out. We can't let a moment of carelessness lead to

our downfall.”

“I get it already, stop worrying!” Tangerine activated Keen Perception and then glanced over her shoulder.

In that same moment, Nie Yan crushed a Web Scroll he had been holding in his hand, whereupon a giant net of webbing emerged out of thin air, entrapping her. Mages had high resistance against transformation magic such as Sheep Transformation, making it very likely for her to ignore the spell altogether, which was why he chose to use the Web Scroll instead.

Seeing the web had successfully entangled her, Nie Yan rushed up to her with his dagger raised.

He still had to keep in mind that although Web rooted a player in place, it wouldn't prevent them from casting spells.

Nie Yan closed in, intending to use Concussive Blow which would render her incapable of escaping. If he were to succeed, then she would undoubtedly die!

Before he could close in, however, she waved her staff and cast Repel!

Following which Nie Yan suddenly found himself being pushed back by a powerful force as a protective screen was formed between them, preventing him from reaching her. After another wave of her staff, dazzling arcane energy began rapidly converging

on her location. She was using Arcane Flame Burst!

The ball of black fire headed straight for Nie Yan, streaking through the air!

This woman actually had Repel! It was an uncommon skill that was a huge headache for many Thieves. It could prevent an opponent from approaching within ten meters of the caster for five seconds.

A Thief that was unable to get close wouldn't be able to unleash their crucial attacking skills. Hence, they would become nothing more than target practice for the Mage.

Nie Yan rolled to the side and dodged her incoming Arcane Flame Burst.

“Tangerine, focus over here! Kill the Zombie King first, then we'll deal with that guy together!” Hidden Blade called out in a tense manner. Since the Zombie King was nearing the end of its life, it entered an enraged state causing its attacks to become even more powerful. If they were able to kill the Zombie King, then Nie Yan would have no hope of turning the situation around. After all, Tangerine had plenty of methods to deal with Thieves, so toying with Nie Yan until he died would be a rather simple affair.

“Hmph!” Tangerine shot a disdainful glare at Nie Yan who had been pushed back ten meters, then returned to shooting spells at the Zombie King. For the time being, she completely disregarded his existence, showing nothing but blatant contempt.

If he wanted to close in on her, then he would have to wait several more seconds. This posed quite a problem since by that time, she would have plenty of crowd control spells ready to deal with him.

Nie Yan originally wanted to get rid of Tangerine first before proceeding to take care of Night Shadow and Hidden Blade, but now it seemed like there wouldn't be enough time for that.

Most of Victorious Return's resources were funnelled into their elite team, of which included Tangerine, Night Shadow, and Hidden Blade. Their equipment and skills were clear evidence of Victorious Return's powerful and deep foundation.

Although the equipment Nie Yan wore was decent, the superiority of the Chapter of Courage and Chapter of Freedom would only begin to manifest itself in the later stages of the game. As for Sulgata's Boots, even though they weren't bad, they were still only a single piece of equipment. Therefore, if he were to compare his gear to theirs, stat for stat, he would find himself somewhat lacking.

Worst of all, it was a three versus one! With a skilled Arcane Mage glaring at his back like a tiger, it would be incredibly difficult for him to act freely.

If they were to truly go at it, then Nie Yan wasn't afraid of Tangerine. The real problem was that he wouldn't be able to deal with her in a short period of time. Moreover, at this moment, the

Zombie King was already very close to dying.

From his perspective, if the Zombie King was stolen and the equipment went to them, then it would be tantamount to slapping him across the face. This was a matter of pride; such an outcome was absolutely intolerable!

Having been left with no other choice, Nie Yan crushed a Haste Scroll before dashing toward Hidden Blade. Closing the distance almost immediately, his dagger flashed with a cold ray of light. Dammit, I don't care if you're a Berserker! Just because you have some armour, you think I can't deal with you!?

Chapter 133 – Murder!

Even now, Nie Yan still didn't wish to use Sacrificial Gambit. Its two-day cooldown wasn't trivial since he wanted to have this skill in his arsenal for the quest he planned to embark on after returning to the city. However, since he had been forced into a corner, he was left with no other choice. He firmly believed that a person should live their life with steadfast resolve. As such, if he were to back down now, without even putting up a fight and allow the Zombie King to be taken away by someone else, he would be nothing more than a spineless coward!

Seeing Nie Yan dash over, Night Shadow withdrew from the battle with the Zombie King and raised his daggers to intercept him.

Battle Stance!

When a Battle Thief activated Battle Stance, they would receive a 30% increase in Attack Speed and a 20% increase in Attack, allowing their damage output to even surpass some Berserkers'. Its only flaw was that, even though their offensive abilities saw a sharp rise, they were still protected by merely leather armour.

「Klang!」Two pairs of daggers clashed together.

Amidst their deadlock, Nie Yan suddenly switched over from a reverse grip to a forward grip as his dagger slipped through Night Shadow's guard like a snake before a fatal strike. Everything was over in an instant, and before Night Shadow even knew what was

going on, he found himself in a dazed state.

Nie Yan's mysterious action was actually a technique from his past life which Shadow Dancers often displayed in featured videos on Conviction's official website. During the animation for switching grips, there was a very precise timing window where a Thief would be able to slip through an opponent's guard and stun them with the pommel.

Back then, for the sake of mastering this technique, he had practiced these movements over several hundred thousand times. Perhaps this little trick wouldn't be effective against the experienced Shadow Dancers of his original timeline, but it was more than enough to deal with players in the present day.

But, before he could proceed any further, a streak of arcane magic came flying his way.

Tangerine's spell was perfectly timed. If he rolled out of the way now, the outcome would be the same as last time; Night Shadow would be allowed a moment to catch his breath.

However, the circumstances this time were substantially different from the previous encounter. For one, he was no longer the target of the Zombie King's aggro, which was why he previously hadn't dared to be rash and chose to avoid the oncoming spell. Yet now, the Zombie King was entirely aggroed onto Hidden Blade. If Tangerine believed she could shoo him away with just a single spell, then she was living in a dream!

Nie Yan mentally braced himself to endure the impact.「Bang!」He felt the Arcane Fireball explode on his back as it depleted 120 of his health.

What ferocious damage! His gear was considered good, but he had still lost so much health.

Afterward, Nie Yan struck Night Shadow with Assassinate followed by Lacerate and chunked him for 180 health. Aside from this initial damage, Night Shadow was also inflicted with the bleed status effect which caused him to lose 10 health every second.

Even though this number was frighteningly high, it didn't kill him since Battle Thieves were generally more durable than Tempest Thieves. Night Shadow, for instance, had as much as 520 health.

However, when matched against Nie Yan's damage, it still wasn't nearly enough to save him!

Nie Yan followed up by circling behind Night Shadow and hitting him in the back of the head with [Smothering Strike](#). Afterward, he brought out a Sheep Transformation Scroll and began channeling it. His target for the spell, surprisingly, wasn't Night Shadow but Hidden Blade instead!

Smothering Strike - Strike an enemy from behind, putting them in a dazed state for six seconds. Target will awaken from dazed if attacked. This skill has a cooldown of 30 seconds.

Just as Hidden Blade was about to strike the Zombie King with

Flame Slash, a bright radiance enshrouded him and his skill was interrupted as he transformed into a small sheep.

Currently, the Zombie King had only 8% health remaining. After falling below 20%, it would enter an enraged state and gain a life drain modifier on all of its attacks, making it noticeably more difficult to kill if a party was fighting against it the standard way. Therefore, as soon as both Night Shadow and Hidden Blade stopped dealing damage, its health would soon begin to recover.

For the sake of rescuing Night Shadow, Tangerine changed the focus of her firepower onto Nie Yan while Hidden Blade was still hopping around as a sheep. As a result, the Zombie King's health stagnated after falling down to 3% before recovering back up to 5% upon successfully swiping the sheep in front of it several times.

Consequently, Hidden Blade's transformation was forcefully cancelled by these attacks.

Nie Yan chugged down a health potion and then applied a Combat Bandage.「Bang!」Tangerine's spell struck Nie Yan again, chunking him for 130 health.

However, Nie Yan endured the pain and struck Night Shadow with Backstab and Eviscerate, causing 253 health to disappear in an instant.

Night Shadow was awoken from his dazed state by Backstab, but he wasn't given the time to drink a health potion.

“Die!” Nie Yan activated Vital Strike, his dagger flashing brilliantly before streaking across Night Shadow’s neck.

The last of Night Shadow’s health was instantly taken away, and with a plop, he collapsed onto the ground.

Tangerine stared blankly at the scene. She never expected that Nie Yan’s damage would be so terrifying. It hadn’t even been several exchanges, yet Night Shadow was already down for the count. She hadn’t even finished casting her third spell yet!

Hidden Blade, whose transformation was broken, was left in shock when he saw the party notification of Night Shadow’s death. However, he didn’t have much time to process this information when the Zombie King struck out with yet another swipe of its claws. He did his best to resist, but his health had already fallen by over 200 points while enduring its assault.

“Flame Slash!”

Hidden Blade finally got his skill off, and as his claymore ignited with flames, he slashed down on the Zombie King who in turn let out a mournful cry. As its lumbering body collapsed to the ground, a wisp of light floated up from its corpse before dissipating in the sky.

Shortly after Nie Yan finished off Night Shadow, he turned around to find that Hidden Blade had already slain the Zombie King. He was still a step too late... In the end, it was snatched away!

Nie Yan was absolutely indignant when he saw the experience from the Zombie King, that he had worked so hard on to wear down, go to someone else.

Hidden Blade was also briefly taken aback by the death of his teammate. However, he soon recovered and dashed toward Nie Yan with Vanguard Rush.

If Hidden Blade was allowed to get in range to use Tendon Break, then Nie Yan would be done for.

Meanwhile, Tangerine's Arcane Fireball was also flying over. Suffering an attack from both sides, Nie Yan would undoubtedly die!

It's either you or me! He had to finish Hidden Blade off in this instance; otherwise, he had no hope of surviving this predicament!

Sacrificial Gambit!

Nie Yan's health bar plummeted as he sacrificed 30% of his current health. The missing health transformed into energy which converged at the tip of his dagger where it began radiating a murderous aura. As streaks of sparks danced in the air, the dagger was instantly propelled forward and plunged into Hidden Blade's chest, causing the volatile energy to wreak havoc inside his body.

As the damage value rose up above Hidden Blade's head, an inconceivably shocked expression was plastered all over his face. He believed that his 193 remaining health was more than enough to deal with Nie Yan. In fact, none of the Thieves he had encountered so far were capable of dealing more than 30 damage to him in a single hit. Protected by his heavy plate armour that was capable of brushing off any attack from a dagger, he was confident that, as long as he could cripple Nie Yan with Tendon Break then follow up with Violent Slash, Nie Yan would undoubtedly die!

His overconfidence in his defensive abilities and gear was the main factor leading to his untimely death.

At the same time, Nie Yan's Sacrificial Gambit was truly an anomaly!

Never could he have predicted, not even in his wildest dreams, that Nie Yan would be able to deal such explosive burst damage!

Both Night Shadow and Hidden Blade were killed within seconds of each other. Now, the only remaining member of the party was Tangerine. Even though she had experienced countless battles in her life, she could never have foreseen this one coming to a conclusion such as this. Even in life and death battles on the front lines of large-scale guild wars, she would be able to maintain a calm and collected heart. Yet at present, she couldn't help but feel a chill run down her spine.

After killing Hidden Blade, Nie Yan rolled out of the way and dodged another one of Tangerine's Arcane Flame Bursts.

「Bang!」Upon impact with the ground, the spell exploded into a shower of black flames.

After regaining his footing, he fished up the equipment that Night Shadow, Hidden Blade, and the Zombie King dropped upon their deaths. A moment later, he shifted his attention to Tangerine whom he stared at with an icy expression.

In that moment, Tangerine finally revealed a trace of panic. Dropping a level was a small matter, but if she died, she would also drop a piece of equipment and lose the set bonus from her gear.

Out of the three members in the party, only she was left. The mental blow from such a realization was intense.

“I thought you were so strong. What now? Are you finally getting scared?” Earlier, Tangerine had completely disregarded his existence. He still hadn't forgotten her arrogant expression that was full of contempt. Step by step, he began to walk toward her.

“It's not over yet. Don't be so eager to count your chickens before they hatch!” Tangerine shouted in a flustered manner. She then brandished her staff to show that she had yet to give up. However, the high and aloof sense of superiority that she felt toward him had been completely shattered by the death of her two comrades.

Spells like Repel, although effective against Thieves, would only be able to keep them away for a short time and posed no real threat to their lives.

Tangerine had overestimated her ability. In a true one-on-one battle, Nie Yan could effortlessly toy with her to death!

If she believed Nie Yan was one of those Thieves she could kill by simply relying on her high damage, then she was in for a surprise.

Tangerine raised her staff and began chanting the incantation for her magic. As a halo of magical energy began converging at the tip of her staff, it started emitting an azure radiance that was magnificent to behold.

This woman actually has Arcane Reset!

Obscurus Magic was similar to Elemental Temple Magic and Templar Magic in that they possessed formidable might. Arcane Reset, for example, when cast successfully, would set the cooldowns of all the caster's other spells to zero for three minutes. In other words, during that period of time, she would be able to fire off however many spells she had in her arsenal without worrying about their cooldowns. This spell was absolutely terrifying in duels! Of course, there were still cast times. However, as long as they had enough mana, the caster would be able to cast several dozen spells in the span of thirty seconds.

He couldn't allow her to finish casting that spell! Even a tanky fighter would not dare to rashly confront such a formidable magic.

Nie Yan retrieved a pouch of Flash Powder and lobbed it at her. 「Poof!」The pouch exploded into a shower of blinding rays that pierced into Tangerine's eyes like a thousand needles, causing her to temporarily lose vision.

“Drop dead!” Tangerine's expression turned incomparably ugly to behold as she sent a wave of Arcane Fireballs flying over to him.

「Boom-boom-boom-boom-boom!」Like tongues of flame, countless fireballs streaked through the air and chaotically peppered the earth with craters.

“Stupid girl, where do you think you're aiming at?” Nie Yan coldly smiled. The area where he stood was completely untouched; however, just a little to the left of him, the earth was no longer recognizable.

A brief moment later, Tangerine finally regained her vision.

“Already out of mana, eh?” Nie Yan coldly chuckled. This arrogant woman had finally taken a bite from a bitter fruit. Although the utility of Arcane Reset allowed her to explode with all her damage in but a split second, it didn't provide her with an endless pool of mana.

Tangerine was just like a rooster that lost a fight. She bitterly glared at Nie Yan and shouted in a fierce tone, “I'll get my revenge!”

“I welcome it at any time. Here, let me make things easier for you. I’ll send you back to the city for free.” Just in case Tangerine still wanted to pull any dirty tricks, Nie Yan dashed forward and stunned her with Concussive Blow before finishing her off with Lacerate followed by Vital Strike, sending her back to the graveyard in Calore. As a Mage, she was much frailer than other classes.

After getting rid of Tangerine, Nie Yan bent down to pick up the item she dropped, a Level 10 Arcane Mage Staff.

Chapter 134 – Red Name

Nie Yan glanced at his status bar and was disappointed to find his name branded red. Though, now that he thought back to earlier, he was indeed the one who had drawn first blood. However, the circumstances at that time were very tense. He had no time to thoroughly consider the consequences of his actions. After all, if Night Shadow got the first attack in while he still held the Zombie King's aggro, then he would be sandwiched between two enemies and it would without a doubt mark his death.

Sadly, there was nothing he could do about this since the system rules for player interaction were as such. Truthfully, the act of PKing, or player killing, was a form of recreation unto itself. To effortlessly dispose of an opponent while staying within the boundaries set by the game, now that was the highest level of play very few could achieve.

In his earlier predicament, it was impossible for him to yield the first attack to the enemy. As for cutting his losses and leaving, that was even more of an impossibility! However, he had to admit he did have such an urge at the back of his mind, but in those circumstances, who would possibly submit to such humiliation!?

Though, after killing those three players, his name had been branded in a deep crimson red.

Nonetheless, it wasn't anything so alarming that it would make him worry. In his past life, he had been branded red at least several dozen times over. In especially chaotic battles, being branded red two or three times in a single day was a fairly regular occurrence.

Even though his name was branded red, based on his current gear, if other players wished to kill him, it would be as difficult as ascending the heavens. If he wanted to escape, there was no one who would be able to bar his way! This was why he wasn't feeling the least bit anxious.

However, based on his current Influence in Calore, while his name was still branded red, he would immediately be attacked by the guards upon being spotted.

Nie Yan suddenly recalled, if his name was red, he could simply hunt Scaled Frogs!

They were especially great monsters for reducing the PKer status effect. Not to mention they gave increased experience and higher drop rates while under a red name. Sometimes, if a player was lucky, they would drop a special present known as the Killer's Demonic Medallion!

Perhaps there's still some good that can come out of this.

His battle with Tangerine, Night Shadow, and Hidden Blade was a wake-up call. The two chapters from the Book of Order and the fragment of Sulgata's Shadow were items that would benefit him greatly in the future. After all, he would receive four more stat points than the average player every five levels. However, since he had spent so much time gathering them, the rest of his gear became lacking as a result, a reminder that he needed to be faster with levelling and collecting better equipment; otherwise, he might not be so lucky in his next encounter.

After reaffirming his resolve, he examined the Level 10 Arcane Mage Staff in his hands.

Blackwind Staff (Gold)

Requirements: Level 10

Properties: Magic Power 62–68, +30 Explosion Damage, +30% damage against Beast-type monsters

Weight: 2 lb

Restrictions: Arcane Mage; can only be equipped by members of the Righteous Guardians of Order.

It turns out that woman actually had this sort of weapon! No wonder she dealt so much damage. No matter how high my defense was, it would have still been useless... I should give this staff to Tang Yao, just in time too since he's about to hit Level 10. Then, after switching his gear, we can leave to do the quest. But without Sacrificial Gambit, I'm not sure we can still succeed. I ought to get him some better spells to increase our chances.

Nie Yan proceeded to examine the equipment the two other players dropped. Night Shadow dropped the Blackwing Cloak. Since it could only be equipped by Battle Thieves, there was nothing Nie Yan could do about it. Meanwhile, Hidden Blade dropped a piece of Warrior armour.

Finally, he moved on to the item the Zombie King dropped which gave him a pleasant surprise.

Zombie King’s Leather Leg Guards (Gold)

Requirements: Level 10

Properties: Defense: 29–35, Resilience +12, Movement Speed +16

Weight: 2 lb

Restrictions: Thief; can be equipped by all factions.

「How are things on your side?」Nie Yan popped Tang Yao a message.

「I just hit Level 10, so I’m about to head back to Calore. Are we going to do the quest next?」Tang Yao asked. Now that he had a Rank 3 Arcane Fairy by his side, he really wanted to test it out against some stronger mobs.

「We’re having a slight change of plans. I’m branded with a red name...」Nie Yan let out a forced smile as he helplessly replied.

Tang Yao was momentarily left speechless. After pulling himself together, he exclaimed,「R-red name? Did you just PK someone!?!」

「Three, actually. Members of Victorious Return, they tried kill

stealing an Elite from me. In the end, I finished them off.」

「Holy crap! You're amazing! You were actually able to take on all three of them at once? What level were they? 」Tang Yao didn't seem disappointed at all by the fact that Nie Yan was branded with a red name and had to delay their plans. On the contrary, it was actually quite the opposite; he was elated—not because Nie Yan had to delay their plans or because he was branded as a PKer, but because he had single-handedly fought three opponents at once... and won! That was an incredible accomplishment!

「They were all Level 10.」

「Dear Lord...! Level 10!? And here I thought they were all low-level trash!」Tang Yao was given quite a shock. He knew exactly what a Level 10 player in a major guild signified. It meant they were the elites of the guild, members of the main dungeon running team, and certainly not someone like him who had relied on grinding mobs endlessly in a single area to level up! Yet this brother of his had actually managed to deal with—not one, but three such frightening existences! At a time where the vast majority of players were still levelling in low-level zones, this sort of achievement was simply inconceivable!

A lone player had PKed three members of Victorious Return's elite team... Such a fact was still hard for him to accept.

After a moment of silence as he processed this information, he finally spoke.「Alright... I understand! Tell me where you are, and I'll meet you there. Don't get killed by other players in the meantime. If you do, you'll end up dropping all your gear.」This

matter was Tang Yao's sole worry. Though, after giving it a second thought, he believed he might have been overthinking things. With Nie Yan's ability, the fact that he wasn't purposefully causing trouble for other players was already a godsend for the entire community. If other players wanted to kill his brother, then they better start reconsidering their own life choices!

「I'm at Black Gold Mines. I've thought of a good way to remove my PKer status, but I'll need you to help me prepare a few things first. Head back to Calore and talk to Bird Leaves No Eggs at the Starry Night Potion Shop. He'll give you some money. After buying all the consumables I need in the city, I want you to teleport over to Tasoyi Village in Plague Canyons and help me buy some Smoke Powder, 」Nie Yan instructed before he began explaining his relation with the Starry Night Potion Shop. By the end of it all, Tang Yao couldn't be more amazed if he wanted to. The business that made such a huge uproar all over Calore was actually opened by Nie Yan? Though, after thinking over these matters some more, he became thoroughly convinced. Who knew just how many more secrets this brother of his was keeping? However, one thing was certain; he would do his utmost to keep the ones that Nie Yan shared with him.

「Smoke Powder? What kind of item is that?」Tang Yao asked in bewilderment.

「You'll find out when you get there. By the way, bring some extra money with you. They sell for five gold a batch over there, and there's twenty in a batch. I'll tell Bird to give you six gold.」

「The hell, what kind of item is that expensive!? And five gold can

only buy twenty of them? That's way too much! Are they trying to rob people blind!?'Tang Yao sucked in a breath of cold air.

「Don't ask so many questions. I'll explain everything when you get back.」

「Alright, I'll get it done as quickly as possible.」

「Good, I'll be grinding some mobs. When you're almost done, just pop me a message,」Nie Yan said. For the time being, he could only hunt some of the ordinary Zombie Miners in the area and do his best to reduce his PKer status albeit if only slightly.

And so, while following Nie Yan's instructions, Tang Yao urgently purchased all of the items he requested from the NPC shops, including the batch of Smoke Powder that could only be purchased exclusively in Tasoyi Village. Just like that, five gold went down the drain. Tang Yao's heart ached sorely, as if it were being stabbed by a thousand daggers, when he thought about the money that had been spent. Five gold, if were to turn all that into Health Potions he would have enough to last him three entire months. If he were to use it to buy equipment, then he would be able to put on an entire set of Gold-grade gear. Yet in Nie Yan's hands, it became twenty strange pouches of powder that he still knew nothing about! Gaaah, what a waste!

「I'm there, tell me your coordinates,」Tang Yao messaged.

「I'm at 23838.23828.」Nie Yan sent over his coordinates to Tang Yao.

「I'm near the area. I'll be there in a bit.」

After a while, a fatty could be seen approaching from the distance, panting for air as he ran. Sticking close by was a ball of blue light following from behind.

“Ha... ha... ha... I'm so tired, give me a second to catch my breath...” A brief moment later, Tang Yao looked up and got a better inspection of Nie Yan's name. “Ahh, why is it so red!?” he gasped in shock.

“Go find three players to kill, and yours will be just as red too,” Nie Yan bitterly replied.

“Well, aren't you fierce?” Tang Yao chuckled.

“Alright, stop standing there and poking fun at another's misfortune. Help me bring these things back to the city. I'll give you access to my personal storage, so deposit them in there,” Nie Yan said.

“Eh, I have to run there and back again!?” Tang Yao exclaimed in a dejected tone.

“My bag is packed to the brim with items. Or are you telling me you'd rather have me throw them all away? I guess you won't be needing the Gold-grade staff that's inside there then.”

“Gold-grade staff? Show me!” Hearing a Gold-grade weapon being mentioned, Tang Yao’s eyes lit up with a hint of greed.

“Here,” Nie Yan sent Tang Yao a trade request. Then, he opened up the trade window and placed the Blackwind Staff inside.

“Awesome! If you had a Gold-grade staff for me, why didn’t you just say so earlier?” After examining the staff’s properties, his face immediately lit up, and without raising any further complaints, he said, “Good sir, I am wholeheartedly at your service. I promise I’ll have these items inside your storage within three minutes and be back here in twenty at most.”

“Then go already!” Nie Yan jokingly scolded before giving him the rest of the items.

Tang Yao teleported back to the city with a Return Scroll before hurrying back to Nie Yan’s side after depositing the items.

“So, what are we doing next?”

“We’re going to hunt Scaled Frogs. I’ll send you the party invite.”

Young Sparrow Hawk has joined your party.

With their party formed, the pair set out to the area that spawned Scaled Frogs.

After exiting Black Gold Mines, they continued south until they arrived in a large of forest lush with greenery. Occasionally, between the gaps in the trees, they would be able to spot a few cowlike monsters grazing on the grass while passing by.

“Whatever you do, stay hidden. If we encounter any monsters, just circle around them, and absolutely do not draw any of their aggro.” Nie Yan gave Tang Yao a reminder.

“Where are we going? Why do I get the feeling that we’re in a very dangerous area?” Tang Yao whispered back.

“We’re in a Level 30 area, so we need to be a bit careful. Thankfully, the monsters here are pretty docile. As long as we don’t get within five meters of them, they won’t aggro onto us.”

“Level 30 area!?” Tang Yao was so shocked his eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. Coming to a Level 30 zone at their level, weren’t they just seeking death? Though, after considering things over, he voiced no further complaints. Several days ago, Nie Yan had brought him over to the Level 25 zone, Hems Wasteland. With that being the case, what difference was there in going a little higher?

After traversing the dense thickets for some time, they would occasionally come across one or two cowlike monsters. They were big and robust, possessing long, sharp horns and thick hides covered in pure black coats. Their appearances were quite daunting.

Tang Yao in particular was left especially panic-stricken by their presence. Unlike Thieves who had a good chance of escaping whatever dangers they encountered, he was a slow, cloth-armoured Mage. If he were to be targeted by any of the monsters in this area, he would undoubtedly meet his demise.

After passing through the cow monster zone, Nie Yan and Tang Yao finally arrived at the Scaled Frog area.

Chapter 135 – Smoke Powder

Domineering and covered in black scales, these huge Scaled Frogs appeared particularly terrifying as they lumbered across the forest floor. Tang Yao, upon spotting them, nearly received a heart attack from fright. Are you serious? Are these supposed to be the mobs we could handle!?

“Your Arcane Fairy’s Ignore Level Difference is at +7 now, right?” Nie Yan asked. Ignore Level Difference was a fairly useful property, especially when engaging higher level mobs—while in PvP, its advantages were obvious. With it, Tang Yao would be able to inflict effective damage against opponents up to 12 levels higher than him. When facing opponents above that, there was a chance of ignoring the level difference.

“Yeah.” Tang Yao nodded.

“Good, we can hunt these Scaled Frogs then. As long as one in five of your spells procs the Ignore Level Difference effect, you’ll be able to whittle their health down. Also, with the Arcane Fairy around, you won’t have to worry about conserving your mana because you’ll never run out in the first place!” Only after factoring in this minor detail did Nie Yan realize that it would be beneficial to bring Tang Yao along. After all, who knew what sort of goodies these mobs would drop while hunting them at their current level? Not only that, but they gave plenty of experience as well. Hence, this was the perfect opportunity for the pair of best friends to do some levelling together!

Nie Yan glanced at the leaderboards. At present, the highest

ranked player in the entire Viridian Empire was Victorious Return's guild leader, Heaven Breaker, who had already reached Level 15. After the opening of Sosil Valley and Medusa's Lair, he had soared to the top of the leaderboards. As a testament to his guild's power, the third and sixth positions belonged to Victorious Return as well. Second place was occupied by a Level 14 member of Holy Judgement, while Sleepy Fox, who was already Level 13, was ranked fourth. Fifth place belonged to a member of Radiant Sacred Flame, and seventh place belonged to Battle Crazy Alliance's very own Kill Love.

As for the top-ranked guild of the Righteous Faction in his previous timeline, Angel Corp, their scope of influence was limited to the Satreen Empire, which had their own leaderboards separate from the Viridian Empire's.

Five formidable powers had risen to prominence in the Viridian Empire: Victorious Return, Radiant Sacred Flame, Holy Judgement, Holy Empire, and Battle Crazy Alliance. The other guilds struggling for power were relegated to second-rate positions.

Naturally, many more formidable powers would emerge in the future; however, in the initial stages of the game, there were only these five. Their influence was still relatively minimal for the time being—not yet enough to shake the empire as a whole—but when they started partitioning the empire's strongholds and receiving its respective taxes, they would grow immensely in power to the extent of obtaining seats in the empire's parliament. From then on, they would truly be able to reshape the policies of the empire.

If forthcoming events proceeded as they had in the previous timeline, then Cao Xu would bring Victorious Return, Radiant Sacred Flame, and three other major guilds under his control, gaining a vast number of strongholds and ascending to the position powerful overlord. Afterward, he would secure seven seats in the empire's parliament and become such a domineering existence that the other three powers—Holy Judgement, Battle Crazy Alliance, and Holy Empire—would go to great lengths to avoid his crosshairs. If such events were to recur, then Nie Yan would be unable to live his days in peace.

If he wanted to avert this worst-case scenario, it wouldn't do to remain forever complacent in the shadows, unwilling to step into the spotlight. As a single person, no matter how many players he could take on by himself because of his growth in level or the gear he obtained, there was no way he could match the might of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of men.

As he anticipated the possibilities of the future, Nie Yan sank into deep thought. Even though he had collected several items that would greatly aid his growth in the future, these still weren't nearly enough to achieve his ambitions. He needed to quicken his pace!

"I might not run out of mana, but these things are Level 30! They're way faster than I am. As soon as I aggro one of them, I'm dead..." Tang Yao wryly pointed out.

"No worries, that's why we brought this powder along." Nie Yan retrieved a pouch of Smoke Powder from his bag.

“What’s that supposed to do?” Even though he had seen its description, he was never able to figure out how it could prove useful.

Smoke Powder: Covers everything in a thirty-meter range in a dense cloud of smoke and reduces the Sight of both enemies and allies by 15. Effective against all living beings Level 50 and lower. Duration: 2 hours.

“You’ll see in just a moment,” Nie Yan replied in a mysterious manner.

“If this Smoke Powder only affects enemies and not allies, then I could see how it would be somewhat useful. But it doesn’t, so it’s pretty much useless, right? Are you sure you didn’t misread the description? What about in PvP? It’s useless as well! Losing 15 points of Sight is nothing! Does this even work on monsters?” Tang Yao rattled on in bewilderment. In a daylight setting, an average player at this stage of the game had 50–60 points of Sight. In a dark setting like an underground dungeon or cave where vision was reduced by 90%, only then would something like Smoke Powder prove useful. However, who in their right mind would deliberately PvP in such areas?

“Why wouldn’t it affect monsters? They have stats too, right? Everyone starts out with a base Sight of 30. After raising awareness, it might rise to 60 or higher. As for me, I have 57 points of Sight. Every monster has a weakness, and for these Scaled Frogs, it’s their low Sight. At 40 points, it means they won’t be able to see you so long as you stay over 40 meters away from them, but I know

your attacks don't reach that far. That's why I brought the Smoke Powder. It can reduce their range of vision to only 25 meters. As long as you keep your distance while firing spells, they'll never be able to catch you," Nie Yan explained.

"Is that really how it works?" Tang Yao was dumbfounded. He didn't really feel that it would be so simple, yet Nie Yan's explanation seemed so clear and logical. Maybe, just maybe, this crazy idea of his might actually work...

"Alright, get ready. We're going to head deeper into the forest."

"W-wait, what? We're still going in deeper? Why can't we just hunt them from here?"

"Because we'd be wasting the Smoke Powder on ordinary Scaled Frogs... We're heading deeper to hunt Elites and Sub-Elites." In this vast zone that covered two entire mountains, Nie Yan knew of three locations, set up similarly to Gato the Lion King's, where elites would respawn daily. As for Sub-Elites, they were even more plentiful.

Tang Yao stared blankly for a moment before coming back to reality. He already felt that killing ordinary Level 30 mobs was going to be an impossible task. Yet, at this point, Nie Yan pointed out that his interests actually lied with the Elites rather than the ordinary mobs. This was simply too ridiculous! Did Nie Yan suddenly go crazy? Most Level 30 Elites had frightening amounts of health. Would he really be able to even leave so much as a scratch?

“Stop daydreaming already and let’s go,” Nie Yan said.

The pair penetrated deeper into the forest, avoiding any Scaled Frogs they encountered along the way.

In a certain guild’s headquarters in Calore, the elite members of Victorious Return were all assembled in a meeting hall, an accommodation that the game provided to every guild upon their creation. Theirs in particular was quite large and spacious, capable of fitting over several hundred people.

Their guild leader, Heaven Breaker, was a man in his forties with a tall, robust build and suntanned skin. His appearance, as well as his vicious tendencies in the game, struck fear into the hearts of many players. He was Cao Xu’s business partner in reality and a well-known figure in the criminal underworld. Were it not for the fact that he’d exhausted all other available means, Cao Xu wouldn’t have been able to accumulate such massive wealth. Conversely, without Cao Xu’s support, his influence wouldn’t have risen at such an astronomical rate and he wouldn’t be in the position he was in now. He had over 50,000 subordinates under his control, including quite a few miscreants and criminals. Since he had heard some murmurings behind the scenes, he had entered Conviction early in hopes of taking advantage of its economy to gradually wipe away the records of his criminal past. With the backing of his powerful network, Victorious Return would rapidly expand!

At this moment, Heaven Breaker was akin to a raging lion. The other elite members stayed quiet out of fear; it had been quite a while since their guild leader was this mad.

“Thanks to you three, our dungeon running schedule has been delayed yet again by at least another day! Tangerine, explain what the hell happened out there! How did the three of you end up being killed by a single Thief!? You useless idiots! Is it because things have become too relaxed these past few days? Is that why you decided to screw things up!?” Heaven Breaker furiously cursed.

Tangerine and the other two didn't dare to utter even a single word. Eventually, they could only obediently explain what had happened during their encounter with Nie Yan.

“I'm also not sure what happened... I just remember us clashing daggers during the fight, and then, before I knew it, he suddenly stunned me with Concussive Blow...” Night Shadow explained in a flustered and confused manner. Their exchange was simply too short, and Nie Yan was too quick. From start to finish, he had been clueless.

After hearing the three recount their details of the event, Heaven Breaker pressed no further and began contemplating with a dark expression.

“Alright, you three can leave now. Go run Medusa's Lair a few times to replace the gear you lost. We're heading to Misty Forest tomorrow,” Heaven Breaker calmly instructed, not allowing anyone to see what was going on in the back of his mind.

As if they had just been pardoned of a terrible crime, Tangerine's, Night Shadow's, and Hidden Blade's expressions immediately brightened as they excused themselves before fleeing the hall.

This was the second time such an event had occurred. The first could be chalked up to coincidence since Violet Flames might have died due to carelessness. However, this time, the same player had single-handedly taken down three of his elite members—including Tangerine, who ranked third in the entire guild. In that case, this Nirvana Flame definitely wasn't simple. An expert Thief with unbelievable skill... this did drum up some interest inside of him.

While the pair of friends traversed deeper into the forest, Nie Yan suddenly received a voice call. He checked the Caller ID; it was actually no other than Victorious Return's guild leader, Heaven Breaker!

Heaven Breaker surely wasn't contacting him with kind intentions, but Nie Yan answered the call anyway. Although Victorious Return's association with Cao Xu was kept tightly under wraps, he understood that he would have to confront his enemies eventually, so it might as well be now.

「Nirvana Flame, I presume?」Heaven Breaker's somewhat hoarse voice rang out from the other end.

「Right, that's me.」

「You've killed four of my members so far: Violet Flames, Night Shadow, Tangerine, and Hidden Blade. I'm now giving you two options: one, you can join my guild, and I'll be willing to forgive all of your past transgressions. As for number two, I'm sure we're both very clear on what it is. Victorious Return will never let its enemies off. I'm quite a busy man, so I'll give you three minutes to consider things over.」Heaven Breaker's tone carried over his arrogant and menacing nature.

「Well, since the first option seems impossible, I guess I have no choice but to pick option number two. If you have what it takes, then bring it on. I'll welcome your wrath at any time,」Nie Yan replied coarsely. Considering the interactions he'd had with them in the previous timeline, what could this little enmity between them now possibly count as? He wasn't the least bit afraid of Victorious Return, whether it be in this life or the previous!

「Then that makes things easier for the both of us, doesn't it? I do truly appreciate your candidness.」Heaven Breaker grimly laughed before hanging up.

Tang Yao noticed the change in Nie Yan's expression and asked, "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"It's nothing," Nie Yan waved his hands before changing the subject. "Hey, Tang Yao. Have you ever thought about creating our own guild?"

"Wait, what?! Starting a guild?" Tang Yao asked in shock. This

sudden question caught him completely off guard.

“Yeah, a guild that’s even more powerful than Victorious Return and Radiant Sacred Flame combined!”

Chapter 136 – Level 30 Elite!

Tang Yao stared at Nie Yan with a strange expression of disbelief. A brief moment later, he burst into laughter and said, “You’re joking, right? Why would we ever start a guild?”

“No, I’m dead serious. We’ll be contesting for the top spot,” Nie Yan replied in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Ehh, that sounds like a pain in the ass... I mean, right now, we get to hunt mobs and chase after girls to our heart’s content; isn’t that enough already...?” Tang Yao perplexedly asked.

Nie Yan sank into thought after hearing Tang Yao’s words then burst out into laughter as well. Apparently the grand ambitions of others actually meant nothing to this brother of his. After contemplating a while longer, he concluded that the timing did seem a little too early for establishing a guild. He still didn’t have enough trustworthy people by his side, and there was no way he could handle the task of running an entire guild all by himself.

Even though Nie Yan’s father was presently smuggling goods at the borders of the country, the man had already long set out plans for his future company from its name, how it would operate, to the types of machinery needed for manufacturing. In fact, he had already struck several undisclosed deals with neighbouring countries on the western and northern border. As a result, the profits reaped would be immense, but the risk was all too high. If any of these deals ever fell through, then the company would be toast because the trade contracts he owned were extremely coveted after by others. Hence, in order to mitigate some of this risk in the

previous timeline, Nie Yan's father had heavily invested into the game known as humanity's second world, Conviction. After recruiting experts for his newly established gaming organization, he had founded a guild that became immensely popular for a time called the War God Tribe.

Thanks to the enormous financial backing from his father, the War God Tribe nearly rivalled Victorious Return in power and influence, and the elites under his control were numerous beyond compare. However, as a consequence of the guild becoming powerful enough to contest their position as overlord of the Viridian Empire, Victorious Return began an intense string of counterattacks. They besieged land under the War God Tribe's control, seizing two Strongholds in quick succession, and ruined many of their businesses. Having set foot in the game so late, their foundation was severely lacking which was shown by the fact they owned only one influential property, an auction house opened by one of Nie Yan's cousins. Thus, they eventually crumbled under the fierce attacks launched by their enemy.

Truthfully, after the War God Tribe's initial strikes, Victorious Return had actually shown visible signs of decline. If they had pressed on a little further and organized several more powerful counterattacks, Victorious Return might have ended up on the losing side instead. In fact, were it not for several other guilds joining the fray, such as Radiant Sacred Flame, Bloodlust Blades, and so on, the War God Tribe wouldn't have fallen. Under their combined assault, his father's wealth became meaningless.

Reality was harsh and cruel. If his father's guild hadn't lost their strongholds and defeated Victorious Return instead, they would have seized thirteen strongholds—each of which would generate

astronomical revenue—numerous shops, auction houses, and other properties, and the resulting wealth would have been enough to allow his family to prosper for many generations to come.

In the end, the company his father had built from the ground up through painstaking efforts suffered a crushing defeat, an outcome that could only be attributed to fate not being on their side. In this lifetime, however, Nie Yan would make sure that the War God Tribe wasn't built atop a shallow foundation which was the main factor for their defeat. The several properties he had purchased so far were enough to allow the guild to gain a firm foothold in Calore. With this source of income, they would expand even more ferociously than before, letting the War God Tribe grow into an unshakeable oak that would reach new heights.

Nie Yan originally wanted to wait for his father to establish the War God Tribe before entering the spotlight and merging his assets with his father's because—after his father pulled in his old comrades, colleagues, trustworthy friends, and hired talented management staff—he would have no need to worry about running the guild. However, considering recent developments, if he waited any longer, wouldn't it already be too late?

Even though he was given a second chance, he was still subject to the tides of fate. He could only slowly build his influence a step at a time because if he rushed things too quickly, he was prone to failure. After all, he was only one person and the power he possessed was limited.

Nie Yan smiled at Tang Yao before shaking his head, and said,

“You don’t understand. Often when you’re alone, you won’t be able to protect yourself nor those close to you. An individual’s strength, no matter how powerful, is meaningless in front of many.”

“I don’t understand. I’ve never gotten into a serious conflict with any guild. Why would they go after me?”

“At times, even if you don’t go looking for trouble, trouble will come looking for you.” Nie Yan shook his head, a bitter smile on his face, and then continued, “Establishing a guild is tedious and difficult work. How about we put this discussion off for some other time? For now, we can still afford to hunt monsters at a leisurely pace.”

“Oh, alright. Let’s keep levelling then...” Tang Yao replied, sounding a bit distracted. Why did he suddenly bring up the topic of creating our own guild when we were happily going about our business?

Nie Yan knew that Victorious Return now had their sights on his head. However, as long as he stayed careful, then they probably wouldn’t be able to do any harm to him. After all, spotting and surrounding a lone player in the wilderness was an extremely difficult task, to say nothing of a Thief as skilled as him who only hung around high-level zones.

Although Scaled Frogs appeared clumsy because of their large size, once they spotted an enemy, they would act with incomparable speed. Of course, that was only if they had a target to go after. If they didn’t, then even if they were attacked for half-a-

day, they would be helpless to react.

Scaled Frog (Elite): Level ??

Nie Yan still wasn't able to fully inspect its level, but he knew from his previous life that this monster was Level 30.

"Are you ready?" Nie Yan inquired.

"As ready as I'll ever be..." Tang Yao gulped down a mouthful of saliva.

"Don't worry. As long as you stay over 25 meters away from them, they'll be no different from motionless target dummies. Just focus on casting spells, and you'll be fine," Nie Yan assured with a smile as he patted Tang Yao on the shoulders.

"Alright, if you say so. I'm ready." Tang Yao raised his Blackwind Staff. This newly acquired staff improved his magic power significantly. However, against a Level 30 Elite, he didn't have the least bit faith in his damage.

Afterward, Nie Yan retrieved a pouch of Smoke Powder from his bag before slinking toward the Scaled Frog while in stealth. When he approached within ten meters of the Scaled Frog, it suddenly trembled, apparently sensing his presence.「Poof!」The bag of Smoke Powder burst in his palms, causing a dense cloud of smoke

to proliferate outward, enshrouding everything within a 30-meter area for a predetermined period of time.

Then, he hastily retreated from the area. At the same time, the Scaled Frog didn't seem to react as it was still leisurely roaming around.

「You can start now. Be careful, don't get too close.」

After Nie Yan gave the go-ahead, Tang Yao gradually approached the Scaled Frog. After nearing within 30 meters of the Scaled Frog, it was finally within range of his spells.

Arcane Flame Burst!

After Tang Yao recited the spell, a sphere of black fire emerged from thin air and then shot toward the Scaled Frog.「Bang!」The spell exploded on its body and shaved away 10 health.

The Scaled Frog revealed an alert expression after being struck; its round eyes vigilantly searched for its aggressor. However, after being unable to find Tang Yao, it returned to its passive roaming state.

Seeing the Scaled Frog turn vigilant as it made several steps in his direction, Tang Yao felt extremely nervous, but when he noticed it rather quickly settling back down, he felt his fears quickly disperse. Sending several more spells to test the waters, he found his presence was yet to be noticed.

Everything was progressing smoothly. Of course, this was all thanks to Nie Yan wracking his brains until he finally came up with this method. Normally, killing a Level 30 Elite Scaled Frog wasn't nearly as simple as shooting fish in a barrel.

Tang Yao finally felt reassured. As long as he didn't approach within 25 meters of the Scaled Frog, he was completely safe!

They really could rely on this method to take down an Elite Scaled Frog! This was simply amazing! He couldn't help but get excited as he began wondering what sort of items such a high-level Elite would drop.

The Arcane Fairy never stopped replenishing Tang Yao's mana as he continued to fire spells while constantly repositioning himself to keep the Scaled Frog within the range of the cloud of smoke. 「Blub! Blub! Blub!」The mana in the atmosphere converged toward him as the fairy blew an unending stream of bubbles by his side.

Arcane Fireball! Arcane Missile! Arcane Flame Burst!

Firing spell after spell, Tang Yao seemed to have limitless mana as their cost didn't even put a dent in his mana bar.

“My Arcane Flame Burst advanced by a grade!” Tang Yao exclaimed after a system notification appeared. He began to recall the Elementalist from Radiant Sacred Flame, Dian Cang, who had been able to wipe out one of his party members with a single spell. At that time, he had been badly frightened by Dian Cang's damage.

Yet now, he was also capable of killing an opponent with just a single spell.

Watching Tang Yao firing off spells like a Gatling gun, Nie Yan began to recall that player who had a Rank 5 Arcane Fairy. At the moment, Tang Yao really did seem to somewhat resemble him.

-10, -11, -10, -132....

A string of damage values rose up above the Scaled Frog's head, many of which were fairly low. However, on occasion, a spell would proc the Ignore Level Difference effect and deal a terrifying amount of damage.

In the meantime, Nie Yan didn't have anything left to do. He could simply sit back, relax, and enjoy the free experience and loot.

Tang Yao decided to liven things up as he began chanting a long line of syllables.

“Meteor!”

Wave after wave of meteors rained down from the sky, all without exception bombarding the Scaled Frog. As the area was being carpet bombed, the ground was quickly reduced to scorched black craters.

After casting the spell, Tang Yao's mana fell by one-fifth, but it quickly recovered soon afterward. In the past, when Tang Yao used

Meteor, it would at least consume the greater half of his mana. However, thanks to his Rank 3 Arcane Fairy increasing his mana by 300%, the mana cost of casting Meteor could no longer be regarded as anything taxing.

The damage Tang Yao dealt was just too monstrous; even Nie Yan was left speechless.

The drop rate of an Arcane Soul Crystal was extremely low, not to mention 90% of all Arcane Fairies would end up dying before reaching Rank 3. That was why, even in a group of ten thousand Arcane Mages, it was hard to find one. Tang Yao really had struck gold, finding one so early on in the game.

“Did your Arcane Soul Crystal drop when you were farming monsters with Yu Lan (Blue Feather) and the others?”

“Yep!” Tang Yao replied as he fired off another round of spells.

“None of the Arcane Mages in their team fought with you for it?” Nie Yan asked in surprise. For others to not covet after such a priceless item was quite strange.

“None of them felt comfortable fighting with me over it, but I still thanked them anyway for letting me have it by giving everyone in the team two silver. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have been so broke when you told me to come over to Hems Wasteland.”

After the seemingly unending volley of magic persisted for thirty

minutes, the Scaled Frog could no longer support itself as its right side gave way and it ended up on the ground belly up.

You have successfully slain a Scaled Frog (Elite). +700% experience for killing a monster above your level. You have received 98,290 experience points.

Nie Yan watched as his experience sharply rose from Level 11, 83% to 92%.

As for the other member of his party, Tang Yao, he was enveloped in a bright radiance, and having just recently hit Level 10, he stood foolishly, staring into empty space as he levelled up once again to Level 11.

Chapter 137 – Leaderboards

Since Tang Yao had contributed the most to slaying the Scaled Frog, he received a much larger share of the experience. As such, the generous amount of experience granted by a Level 30 Elite caused him to immediately level up.

In an effort to encourage people to challenge themselves, players would receive more experience if they killed a monster above their level. Depending on how high the monster's level was, the experience they would receive could be as much as several times or higher. However, at the same time, the higher the monster's level, the more difficult it was to hunt due to the level penalties. Players like Nie Yan, who relied on special methods to hunt higher level monsters, were especially rare. So even if he didn't focus all his energy into training, he would still be able to gradually overtake the vast majority of players in level.

“Holy crap, amazing! I levelled up!” Tang Yao exclaimed. He had never seen such a huge jump in `experience before. Even though he had just recently reached Level 10, with just one kill, his experience bar had gone from 1% all the way up to 100%—resulting in him levelling up to Level 11 with 7% already filled! If he kept levelling at this speed, then even attaining the top position on the leaderboards wouldn't be a problem!

Nie Yan leisurely walked up to the Scaled Frog's corpse.

“Let's see what it dropped.” Saying that, he bent down and picked up the drops from the ground: 26 silver, a Fortune Gem, and Thief Leg Guards.

Shadow Wind Leg Guards (Gold)

Requirements: Level 30

Properties: Defense 133–135, Balance +12, Jump +15, Resilience +23

Weight: 12 lb

Restrictions: Thief; can be equipped by all factions.

The Shadow Wind Set, one of the better Level 30 Thief sets, consisted of three pieces of gear: leg guards, shoulder guards, and bracers. When a player equipped all three pieces, they would gain a set bonus of +30% Movement Speed and the Annihilating Edge skill. As he wasn't Level 30, he still couldn't equip it yet. Although he might've already gone off and found something better by the time he did reach Level 30, he planned to hold on to these leg guards nonetheless. Just in case he didn't find anything, the Shadow Wind Set would serve as a decent stand-in.

"A piece of Thief equipment dropped along with 26 silver and a Fortune Gem," Nie Yan looked back over his shoulder and informed Tang Yao.

"Huh...? Oh! Well, let me know if any Mage equipment drops. You can take everything else." Still in amazement, Tang Yao was a little slow to respond.

Just as the pair was about to move on, an important

announcement appeared in the chat.

System Notice: Victorious Return has placed a 50-silver bounty on the head of player Nirvana Flame. The amount will be paid out each time to whoever kills the designated player and forcing them to drop a level. To claim the reward, provide sufficient evidence at Victorious Return's guild headquarters.

Tang Yao, stunned by the announcement, turned to Nie Yan and asked, "Why did Victorious Return put out a bounty on your head? Was it because of those three players you killed?" Just who in the world did Nie Yan piss off for Victorious Return to go after him in such a way?

Even Nie Yan himself didn't expect Victorious Return to place such a large bounty on his head. This meant he would need to be a bit more careful when setting foot outside of the city in the future. He smiled at Tang Yao and said, "Ah, it doesn't matter. It's just a bounty. They'd have to kill me for it to mean anything. Besides, I'm a Thief. What's so scary about having a bounty on my head?"

Nie Yan's carefree and relaxed appearance was a stark contrast to Tang Yao's anxious and brooding expression. The latter recalled the words of the former, about forming their own guild and how a single person's power was meaningless in the face of a larger enemy. Taking these things into consideration, it seemed obvious his brother's true feelings weren't as laid-back as he made them out to be on the surface.

A lone player going up against an entire guild, surely the pressure they'd be facing would be immense...

“If you’re seriously planning to face them alone, I guarantee you’ll be the one coming out of it on the losing end. Come on, let’s establish a guild together and fight them head-on. It’s better than being chased around everywhere and hiding for your life,” Tang Yao suddenly declared in a resolute tone.

“Hoh... Didn’t you say earlier that you were only interested in leisurely training and chasing girls?” Nie Yan chuckled in response. “Don’t worry, they won’t be able to do anything to me, at least not for the time being”

“What kind of man would I be if I still had the leisure to train and chase girls after hearing my brother is being hunted down?” Tang Yao spat on the ground. “God dammit! What’s so amazing about them? You only killed three of theirs, yet they’re sending the entire gang after you! Let’s form a guild and tear them a new one! When we get back, I’ll immediately start recruiting!”

“Are you certain about this?” Nie Yan asked.

“What? Would you be better off if I wasn’t?” Tang Yao replied. He never was someone who cared for something useless to him like power. Him establishing a guild was purely for the sake of helping Nie Yan out of this pickle.

Nie Yan stayed silent for a brief while. Establishing a guild was going to be a little difficult, but what kind of task wasn’t when starting completely from scratch? Even the tallest skyscrapers were built from the ground up. He was planning to establish a

guild anyway, so now was as good a time as any. It was still too early for him to be stepping foot onto the stage, but thankfully Tang Yao was going to take his place. With him personally guiding things from behind the scenes, what heights wouldn't they be able to achieve?

After some deep contemplation, he finally came to an answer, stored all the drops in his bag, and then said, "Let's go, we're heading to the next target."

"There's more Elites in this zone?"

"This zone is pretty large. It covers two entire mountains. Thanks to that, there are still two more areas where we can find Elites. After we're done with them, we can go hunt the Sub-Elites."

"Awesome, let's go then!" Tang Yao felt invigorated after seeing all the experience he gained from the Elite Scaled Frog. After hearing there were two more, he couldn't help but get a little excited.

Meanwhile, Nie Yan continued to ponder some more. If he wished to rally the support of the playerbase and get others to join their guild, then fame would be extremely crucial. After all, who would join the guild of some nobody they've never even heard of? And what better way to gain fame than the through the level leaderboards? Toppling Heaven Breaker from his number one position would deal a heavy blow to Victorious Return. Moreover, with enough fame and prestige, players would blindly flock over to their side. As long as there was an initial push, the number of people applying to their guild would snowball as they became

progressively more popular. Regardless of what the future had in store for them, they would still need to take the first step to make anything happen.

As the pair ventured forth, Nie Yan suddenly received a call from Sleepy Fox.

「How did you end up butting heads with with Victorious Return?」Sleepy Fox asked. He was flabbergasted when he read that Victorious Return had placed a bounty on Nie Yan's head. An entire guild going after a single person—this was definitely a first.

「I killed four of their players.」

「Who were they?」

「I think they were all members of their elite team.」

Sleepy Fox didn't respond immediately, instead he pondered in silence for quite a while before finally replying.「You really are amazing, you know that? Being hunted down by an entire guild isn't something you can lightly brush off. Right now you're completely outnumbered, and if you get caught, you're done for. With how high of a bounty they put on your head, I bet many players will be seeking to claim the reward. If you ever encounter trouble, you can always come find me. Holy Empire might not be as big as Victorious Return, but we still have tens of thousands of members.」

「Thanks, I'll keep that in mind.」Nie Yan expressed his gratitude, but he had no intention of taking Sleepy Fox up on his offer. In the most crucial moment, he didn't believe for a second that Sleepy Fox would be willing to have a falling out with Victorious Return for his sake. After all, as the leader, he had an obligation to consider the wellbeing of his own guild over personal feelings. Nonetheless, Nie Yan still appreciated the sentiment.

After he finished chatting with Sleepy Fox, he received a whole slew of messages from his other acquaintances: [Shenfa Wangxi](#) (Past Destroying God), [Resplendent Bladelight](#), [Leader Young Seven](#), and so on.

Godslayer of Yore is a Holy Mage that Nie Yan encounters in chapter 66.

Resplendant Bladelight is first encountered in chapter 59. His history is explained in chapter 60.

Leader Young Seven and his group were first encountered by Nie Yan in chapter 75 then later on in chapter 82.

「Nie Yan, how did you get a bounty placed on your head? You'll have to be more careful when going out of the city,」Yao Yao anxiously warned.

「Brother, there's a bounty on you! That mean's you've become famous now. Next time we meet, please give me an autograph, haha! I hate those rotten bastards from Victorious Return. If you ever plan to take them on again, please bring me along!」Godslayer of Yore informed. In both this life and the last, he had always despised the likes of Victorious Return.

「Hey, I was just reminded. Are you still planning on forming a team? If you are, then hurry up. The Level 10 dungeons have already opened,」Resplendent Bladelight said. It seemed he didn't care much for Victorious Return's influence.

「Be careful when you step outside of the city. If things get tough, you can always come to us,」Leader Young Seven said. He didn't belong to any guild, but as a professional player, he still had his own circle of trusted contacts. Even though Victorious Return was powerful and overbearing, his group still didn't hold them in high regard.

Nie Yan had met all these players by coincidence. Godslayer of Yore, Resplendent Bladelight, Leader Young and his group in particular were all people that he thought could be potential teammates down the road, which was why he set his mind on recruiting them. Truthfully, when Victorious Return announced the bounty on his head, he expected them to avoid him so as to avoid getting dragged into this mess. After all, their friendship wasn't all that deep.

A person's nature was as such. Whenever trouble came knocking at the door, only then would their true selves be revealed. It was an opportunity to judge whether they were people worth associating with. If they had chosen to shun him instead, then whatever mutual friendship they held prior would have all but vanished. In any case, he had no interest in fraternizing with people who would abandon him at the drop of a dime.

However, this time around, their stances were clear proof that they still held a sense of comradery.

Nie Yan replied to everyone and informed them that he was still alive.

Soon, the pair arrived at their destination and began to hunt the second Elite Scaled Frog.

Once the Smoke Powder was laid down, the Scaled Frog became no different from a practice dummy for Tang Yao to bombard with wave after wave of magic.

“We should get you some better spells. Pretty much every elite Mage from the major guilds have a high-level spell,” Nie Yan said to Tang Yao who was still firing spells at the Scaled Frog. Right now, Tang Yao’s most powerful spell was Meteor, and none of his other spells came even close to comparing with it in regards to area-of-effect damage.

“I heard some of the Arcane Mages there have Obscurus Magic. I wonder where we can find that kind of magic since it seems pretty rare.”

“Obscurus Magic can be obtained after completing a quest from the Arcane Shrines. Naturally, the difficulty for such a quest is pretty high, but you should be able to do it now. Why don’t you head over there when you have some free time? As for ordinary area-of-effect spells, we probably won’t be able to find any in the marketplace. Even so, there are a few we can get by running dungeons, so we’ll do that next time we get a chance,” Nie Yan explained. All of the best items seemed to be found inside of

dungeons, so they would have to embark on a few expeditions if they wanted to obtain them.

Once they finished all their business, he ought to set about gathering a team to run a dungeon. Conveniently, this would also give Tang Yao some time to establish a guild.

Tang Yao unloaded an unending stream of magic at the Scaled Frog. As his spells exploded upon impact with its body, the Scaled Frog's health was gradually chipped away. Thirty minutes later, it finally collapsed to the ground.

Afterward, both Tang Yao and Nie Yan levelled up.

You've reached Level 12. Do you wish to enter the leaderboards?

No!

At present, Nie Yan didn't plan on joining the leaderboards. Tang Yao, on the other hand, was wild with joy as he chose to join, causing both his name and level to appear at the tenth position.

"Are we gonna continue levelling?" Tang Yao asked. He was slightly worried that he was levelling a bit too quickly.

"If you want to establish a guild, then we keep levelling. Though

if you've had a change of heart, then we can just go back," Nie Yan replied. The faster Tang Yao levelled, the more famous he would become. In other words, when the time came for him to establish a guild, if he was a high level, then even more players would flock over to join.

"Of course I'm establishing the guild!" Tang Yao firmly exclaimed. "What's so good about Victorious Return anyways? I'm going to enjoy slaughtering all of them! Even if I'm killed in retaliation, I can easily gain my level back. With such amazing levelling speeds, what do I have to fear? I'm basically an undying cockroach!"

Chapter 138 – Beat Heaven Breaker!

Having killed yet another Elite Scaled Frog, Nie Yan walked up to its corpse and picked up the drops, a Level 30 Gold-grade Mage staff and an Intermediate Alchemy Recipe.

Elemental Convergence Potion Recipe

Requirements: Intermediate Alchemist

Properties: Elemental Magic Cast Time -10%

Materials: Windspirit Grass, Congealing Gel, Diffusing Agent, Quicksilver

If Still Grieving, Quiet Nannan, or Bird—whoever reached Intermediate rank first—learned this recipe, he would be able to put Elemental Convergence Potions up for sale in his shop for 2 silver a bottle, a considerable price for today's playerbase. He had already given Bird permission to access his personal storage, so all of the recipes he picked up from the Zombie Foremen earlier should have already been withdrawn by now. Presumably, Bird had already put them to good use and was now well on his way to stocking the shop up with new goods.

With this potion recipe dropping, his shop would gain another source of income. The potion would attract plenty of player interest, and at the same time, it would also bolster the sales of the other goods in the shop. Aside from the experience, another benefit of hunting high-level monsters was that he would be able to obtain the recipes for potions, pills, and other concoctions that had yet to appear on the marketplace.

After storing the recipe into his bag, Nie Yan handed over the Gold-grade Mage staff to Tang Yao.

As the pair ventured forth, Tang Yao suddenly began receiving calls. He furrowed his brows but would answer them anyway, and

more often than not, an awfully grating high-pitched voice would come out from the other end.

「Young Sparrow Hawk, bring me levelling with you!」

「Can't be bothered, I'm busy training in a Level 50 zone right now.」In an unprecedented event, Tang Yao flatly rejected the advances of a girl.

「Wow, training in a Level 50 zone must be really fast! Come on, take me with you!」

「No, I already told you, I'm busy.」Tang Yao hung up the umpteenth call. Women really were a conundrum! When he boasted of levelling in a Level 20 zone, none of them believed him. Yet now that he entered the leaderboards, they suddenly began begging to come along even after he told them a ridiculous lie. They really were too fickle! He still had his sense of reason when dealing with these type of women. When there were no important matters to attend to, he was fine with playing along with them. However, if they actually believed he would let them leech off of him, then they were wasting their breath.

Tang Yao had always been this way.

From when they were kids until they were full-grown adults, Nie Yan had always had a good understanding of Tang Yao's personality. Even though Tang Yao appeared fickle-natured on the surface, he was never someone to blindly fall for a woman's manipulation. In this life or the previous, he more or less remained

the same.

Tang Yao was happily whistling to himself. After raising his level, he felt quite at ease. When friends of his, like Yu Lan (Blue Feather), inquired about his recent levelling speed, he simply told them that he was training together with Nie Yan, and then, they would no longer consider it to be out of the ordinary. After all, an existence such as Nie Yan couldn't be judged using the logic of an ordinary player. In the end, they could only feel envious of his position.

As Tang Yao's level rose, the damage he dealt to the Scaled Frogs became much more noticeable.

As flames danced in the air, the third Elite Scaled Frog breathed its last. After glancing at his experience bar, Nie Yan noticed he still had a bit to go before hitting Level 13. Since Tang Yao received most of the experience, he was gradually surpassing Nie Yan in level. With such an event occurring, Nie Yan couldn't help but sigh with regret. Mages were simply faster levellers than Thieves whether it be in solo grinding or dungeon runs. Even though Scaled Frogs gave additional experience to players branded with red names, he was still falling behind his brother.

After killing all of the Elite Scaled Frogs in the zone, they would have to wait for the daily reset for them to respawn. Thus, Nie Yan and Tang Yao went after the Sub-Elites which didn't slow down their levelling speed in the slightest.

“Hm, the item I want still hasn't dropped.”

“What are you looking for?”

“An accessory called Killer’s Demonic Medallion. It only has a chance of dropping when a player is branded as a PKer. So we can only find it while my name is still red.”

“Killer’s Demonic Medallion? What does it do?”

“Killer’s Demonic Medallion is one of the best accessories you can obtain in the early levels. It increases all of your stats by quite a bit,” Nie Yan answered. If he had the Killer’s Demonic Medallion, levelling and PvPing in the future would become much easier.

His current gear wasn’t good enough, and he didn’t have enough skills. The main cause for this was that he wasn’t running dungeons often. Hence, he needed a rare item like the Killer’s Demonic Medallion to improve his overall stats.

Tang Yao’s levelling speed was quite ferocious, and many players began to take notice. Not long after reaching tenth place on the leaderboards, he had suddenly levelled up again, and then, a little later, he levelled up yet again. By the time the servers were about to shut down, he was already Level 14 and only a small step away from toppling Heaven Breaker from his number one position. Nie Yan had also managed to keep up, but he declined to reveal his level on the leaderboards.

In the Viridian Empire, Tang Yao was currently the talk of the town.

「This Young Sparrow Hawk guy... is he on drugs? How is he levelling so fast!?!」

「It looks like he's going to snatch away first place from Victorious Return's guild leader, Heaven Breaker.」

「Go Young Sparrow Hawk! Knock him out of first place!」

At a time when most players were slowly levelling step by step, Tang Yao's progress was absolutely terrifying.

Although Victorious Return was a rich and powerful guild with many connections, they had disgruntled many players by cornering off entire zones for their private use. This arrogant behaviour of theirs was also why so many players were supporting Tang Yao.

Things over at Victorious Return's side were also quite hectic. Under Heaven Breaker's orders, they began investigating the background of the player known as Young Sparrow Hawk. However, the only information they managed to dig up was that before this event, this player was completely unknown. Thus, they came to the conclusion that his fast levelling speed was only due to a stroke of good luck such as finding a very suitable levelling spot. As such, Heaven Breaker didn't consider this newcomer a serious threat. Without true power, that Young Sparrow Hawk's levelling speed would gradually start to decline. There was nothing to worry about. At the moment, no one was able to shake Victorious Return's dominance nor would they be able to shake his. After all,

being number one in level didn't necessarily equate to being number one in power.

From his perspective, his rivals were Sleepy Fox, Kill Love, and a few others, but definitely not this nobody named Young Sparrow Hawk!

After slaying their last Sub-Elite Scaled Frog, Nie Yan and Tang Yao both decided to call it a day when they were just a hair away from hitting Level 15. Right now, there was still half-an-hour before the servers would shut down.

"I'm gonna head back to Calore. It's too dangerous for you to be here by yourself, so you should go offline. Then, we'll meet here again when the servers come back up."

"Alright. Oh, do you have any plans for today?" Tang Yao asked.

"Not really. Why, what's up?"

"A few of our friends from middle school told me they want to meet up. They also play Conviction. If we're going to establish a guild, we might as well get them to join too," Tang Yao explained. Those several friends were upperclassmen. They, Tang Yao, and Nie Yan used to all fool around together, so they were pretty close to each other. Even after entering university, they always made sure to contact each other every so often.

Nie Yan thought for a moment and then replied, "I have no

problem with meeting up. When I think back to those days, they sure were carefree and relaxing. It makes me feel all nostalgic...”

“I’ll give you a phone call later. Anyway, I’ll be heading off first, see ya!”

“Later!”

As Tang Yao went offline, his silhouette gradually faded away before disappearing entirely. Afterward, Nie Yan retrieved a Return Scroll from his bag and began channeling it. As a brilliant radiance enveloped him, he was teleported back to Calore. His bag was now filled to the brim with equipment, but almost all of them were for Level 30s. Thus, at least at present, no players would buy them. He planned to use all this equipment to pad their guild warehouse. After all, if a player saw that their guild’s warehouse was full of high-level Silver-and Gold-grade equipment, they surely wouldn’t doubt their guild’s strength.

Depositing the gems and other miscellaneous items from his bag, he did a little organizing in his personal storage. Afterward, he headed toward the Starry Night Potion Shop. It had been a long time since he had last checked up on the shop, so he had a lot of catching up to do.

His first impression after entering the shop was that it was incredibly crowded. There was a constant stream of people coming and going. Especially now that the servers were about to shut down, everyone was doing their last minute shopping.

His eyes scanned over the shelves of the shop. It seemed Bird had done a pretty good job while he was away. They were stocked with potions, elixirs, pills, and all sorts of concoctions. The vast majority of them were commonly seen goods, but when his eyes passed over the front counter, he also noticed quite a few that were fairly rare.

After coming down from the second floor, Bird noticed Nie Yan among the crowd. He quickly whispered,「Boss, you've come.」

「How are things going? From the looks of it, business seems to be booming,」Nie Yan replied. After looking at the shop's revenue, he was given quite a shock. It had already earned 56 gold in his absence. These profits were considerably good. It could be best described as an endless stream of money. No matter how much he spent in a day, more would flow in. Nonetheless, the sudden influx of customers had much to do with the opening of Medusa's Lair, since the majority of the shop's sales came from selling Anti-Petrify Potions.

「Work is fairly normal. In the last few days, we've recruited many Alchemists. Now we have twenty-seven Junior Alchemists and over a hundred and thirty Apprentice Alchemists. We're already running out of space on the second floor, not to mention the first floor is too small. Sometimes it's so crowded that new customers can't even squeeze in!」Bird explained in a troubled tone.

Nie Yan began contemplating. If I want to upgrade the shop to Tier 3, it'll cost me at least 20 gold. Hmm, that should still leave enough money for me to buy one or two prime real-estate properties in other cities.

Many of Calore's properties had already been bought up. Although there were still a few left, they weren't likely to appreciate in value very much in the future, so investing in them wouldn't be all that worthwhile. Good steel needed to be used on a proper blade; his money would be better spent in other cities.

「I've heard that Victorious Return, Radiant Sacred Flame, and Holy Judgement have also opened potion shops, but theirs are still only Tier 1. Also, it seems like they're getting as many customers as they have Alchemists,」Bird proudly informed. They were such large guilds, but they had only recently opened a potion shop. Meanwhile, their Starry Night Potion Shop was already far ahead of the pack.

「Be cautious of the Alchemists under you. You have to look out for the ones that have malicious motives,」Nie Yan cautioned. It would be a huge blow if the Alchemists he painstakingly nurtured were poached by someone else.

「Understood, I'll keep that in mind! I've made all the Alchemists on the second floor sign contracts. If they want to leave to work somewhere else, they'll have to pay back at least five times what was invested into them. We've already given them so much, they won't even dare to think of job hopping.」Bird really did seem to have the mind of a businessman.

「I'll upgrade the shop,」Nie Yan said. Since Bird seemed to be doing well in managing the shop, he had nothing to be anxious about.

Are you certain you wish to upgrade Starry Night Potion Shop to a Tier 3 Shop? The upgrade will cost 20 gold.

Yes!

The shop has been upgraded.

Shortly after the system notification appeared, the Starry Night Potion Shop began rapidly expanding, becoming more than twice as large as before. It was now a three-story building with the second floor dedicated as an Alchemist workshop and the third floor as a warehouse. The first floor suddenly grew much more spacious, and the overall appearance of the shop was even more grandiose.

The Starry Night Potion Shop grew at a rapid pace. It was well on its way to dominating Calore's alchemy market and becoming the kingpin of the industry.

Chapter 139 – Taiga Black

In the present day, several gold was an immense sum for a team or guild, to say nothing of a lone individual. After all, even when an elite team was clearing dungeons, they would earn no more than several dozen silver a run. When that money was divided among numerous team members, there wouldn't be much left for the team itself. Not to mention most players weren't all that wealthy in the first place; they would need to spend their money on equipment, skill books, potions, and other consumables. More often than not, these players were strapped for cash themselves, so what money would they have left to be donating to their guilds? Every guild-related affair came with considerable expenses, especially so in building the warehouse. So even after being squeezed out of all their wealth, these guilds would still have to occasionally visit black market websites to exchange real-world money for in-game currency to supplement their funds lest they fall to ruin from the burden of their daily expenses.

Establishing a guild so early in the game was an incredibly costly affair in both the real and virtual world. Black market dealers were constantly running low on supply due to the high demand, resulting in a premium on in-game currency. Even then, although guilds were willing to buy, these dealers would often have nothing to sell. The average player didn't even have enough money for themselves, so how could they possibly be willing to sell their in-game currency for some pocket change in real-life? A guild was basically a giant sinkhole that swallowed funds and caused endless headaches for the guild leader. If the flow of money ever stopped, the whole guild would quickly collapse. However, in spite of all this, as long as these guilds persevered, their prospects would be exceedingly optimistic. Further down the road, when the Path to Power patch was implemented, strongholds in every city would be

open for guilds to contest over. If a guild successfully besieged a stronghold and occupied it for a period of time, then that stronghold would belong to them, meaning they would receive the taxes from every property, shop, and any sale that was conducted within the stronghold. When that time came, the wealth these guilds would amass would be quite astonishing.

It was precisely because of these prospects that so many guild leaders were willing to pour such a great deal of resources and energy into the game, but at the same time under this immense burden, they didn't have much money left over for purchasing properties let alone opening up a shop. If it weren't for the pressure they felt from the flourishing business of the Starry Night Potion Shop, they would have never rushed to open a potion shop themselves. However, due to insufficient funds, they could only afford properties in remote locations, and the shops they opened were merely Tier 1. Moreover, most of the concoctions created in-house would be used for themselves, and only the surplus would be given to stock the shops. As a result, their businesses were doing very poorly.

Alchemy wasn't the only lucrative crafting profession. There was also Tailoring, Tinkering, and Blacksmithing, but for the time being, they weren't very popular. In the early ranks, the items they created were garbage that no one had any interest in. Take for example a Blacksmith, at Apprentice rank, the weapons they created were all around Novice-grade. After advancing to Junior Blacksmiths, their creations would still only be Bronze-grade at best. Even if they sold them in the marketplace, they wouldn't earn much money. This was why Alchemy was currently the most popular crafting profession in the game. After all, even low-level concoctions would have some effect when used at higher levels.

Tailoring, Tinkering, and Blacksmithing... Nie Yan certainly had ambitions of stepping into these markets, but for the time being, he didn't possess the resources. Right now, most of his money was being invested into buying land. After settling his current affairs, real-estate in other cities and the Starry Night Potion Shop, he would then be ready to expand to other markets. He figured that at that point many Blacksmiths, Tinkerers, and Tailors would still be uncontracted. And if he truly couldn't find anyone suitable in the future, he could simply headhunt them from other guilds or shops by offering a much higher salary. After all, this was how Cao Xu frequently handled affairs in the previous timeline.

After upgrading the Starry Night Potion Shop to Tier 3, Nie Yan withdrew the remaining money, which amounted to 36 gold, and teleported to the second largest city in the Viridian Empire, Nisode. Calore, Nisode, and Hayson, City of Radiance were where Cao Xu had held the most influence. Back then, Cao Xu had owned over 50% of all properties in these three cities. So in order to prevent him from achieving such dominance again, Nie Yan was purchasing land in these cities for the express purpose of ruining Cao Xu's foundation for growth.

Upon arriving in Nisode, he discovered that nearly all of the smaller plots of land had already been purchased. However, the larger plots, which costed upwards of 10 gold or more, remained untouched.

He was eyeing a specific property located at the heart of the city that costed 28 gold. With such an expensive price tag, no matter how big the guild was, they still wouldn't be able to gobble it up for the time being. The population of Nisode was much lower than Calore's, so although commerce here was still flourishing, the

number of players who were wealthy was comparatively lower.

It would be an understatement to say that the property at the city center was the best in Nisode. If he built an auction house in this location, then in the future it would become the landmark building of the city. Purchasing this plot of land was equal to purchasing half of Nisode!

Nie Yan bought this property without the slightest hesitation. However, simply buying an expensive property wouldn't guarantee success. When it appreciated in value in the future, the monthly property tax would become a considerable expense. The system AI was clever. Although the original price of a property wasn't high, its property tax would rise correspondingly as it rose in value. There was a set amount of tax that would need to be paid every month, acting as a constant stream of money flowing outward. So, if the player was bad at managing their business and couldn't pay their property taxes, then they would be forced to sell their land, thereby preventing regional development from stagnating by transferring the property to a hopefully more competent owner.

Aside from this, Nie Yan also bought a few relatively cheap plots of land. With only 1 gold remaining in his pockets, he teleported back to Calore.

Nie Yan checked his own status bar. The Level 30 Elite Scaled Frogs proved extremely effective at reducing his PKer status. Now, his name was no longer branded red but rather yellow instead. While his name was yellow, NPCs would be wary of the player and treat them rudely. But aside from negatively influencing a player

when they were receiving quests, it had no significant impact on anything else.

A Killer's Demonic Medallion had a chance of dropping from Scaled Frogs when the player was branded with the PKer status effect. Sadly, Nie Yan's luck wasn't great this time around and it didn't drop. Although it was quite a pity, he had no other choice but to suck it up and try again tomorrow. If it still didn't drop, then there was nothing he could do. It could also be due to his PKer score not being high enough. Conjecture aside, it wasn't unusual for an accessory with excellent properties such as the Killer's Demonic Medallion to have an abysmal drop rate.

He then checked his skill bar. The Adjudicator of God skill that he received from the Chapter of Courage finally shifted from being greyed out to brightly lit, signifying that it was now active and available to use.

This skill on a 10-day cooldown timer had made him wait for quite some time!

Nie Yan felt incredibly excited. If he used Adjudicator of God in conjunction with Sacrificial Gambit, then his damage would be astonishing, especially if his luck was good. These two skills along with Steal should even allow him to meet the requirements to clear the next quest.

A strike from Sacrificial Gambit when Adjudicator of God was activated would be quite frightening. Adjudicator of God would increase Nie Yan's health by 500 points, allowing him to reach nearly 900 health. 30% of that would be 270, so that meant as long

as Sacrificial Gambit didn't miss, it would be able to instantly kill most players.

After ten years of playing this game and countless days of theorycrafting, this was the completely brand new style of Thief that he had aspired toward!

In this life, he wouldn't leave behind any regrets. He wouldn't merely stop after Shadow Dancer; he would advance even higher and become a godly existence!

Looking at the time, Nie Yan hastily finished his business and gave Bird a short briefing before logging out of the game.

Removing the game helmet, he got out of bed and headed to the washroom to brush his teeth and wash his face. Afterward, he ran to the kitchen and drank a tube of nutrition tonic from the fridge before setting out on his daily routine.

Some time later, while he was in the middle of tidying up his room, the phone suddenly rang.

「Nie Yan, I'm in front of your house. Come open the door.」The voice belonged to Tang Yao.

「Hold on, I'll be there in a second.」Nie Yan put on his clothes and headed downstairs to meet Tang Yao. After opening the door, he spotted a black sportscar parked on the street right next to his gate. With a fairly large body and a streamline design that made it

resemble a metal feline on wheels, it was one of the hottest models of hover sportcars right now in China, the Taiga Black. Domestically, it represented the highest level of achievement in modern engineering. With a price tag that exceeded many foreign cars, it was powered by a miniature nuclear reactor and could go as fast as 1,800 km/hr, making it faster than most commercial airliners from the past. It was completely made out of bulletproof material that was able to withstand almost any impact and possessed durability equivalent to that of a half-meter thick steel wall.

Right after stepping out of the car, Tang Yao patted the hood and said, “What do you think? Amazing, huh?”

Giving it a look over, Nie Yan nodded his head and replied, “Not bad... This car isn’t really yours, is it?” He recalled that his father had also ordered a Taiga Black before in his past life. It was truly quite a flashy car.

“Tsk! Aren’t you even the tiniest bit surprised? Ah, how disappointing... but you’re right. This fella doesn’t belong to me. It’s my old man’s. Rich people really are different! He even made me pay \$20,000 just to take it out for the day!” Tang said as he rubbed the car’s hood. When he reached the age of sixteen, any money that he spent would have to be earned by himself first. His father didn’t even give him a single cent allowance. So, him speaking about his father in that kind of tone really wasn’t anything. “But you know... being able to drive such a flashy car around really is awesome! Even if I hit a tree or a cement wall, I’d still drive on through!”

Nie Yan chuckled and said, “If your dad knew that this was what you were doing to his precious car, you’d be dead.”

Tang Yao shrugged his shoulders and said in an indifferent tone, “Can’t be helped, not my fault I can’t find parking. Besides, what use is an expensive car if no one’s driving it? Alright, enough gawking. Let’s go, everyone’s waiting.”

In the past two weeks, Tang Yao had gradually noticed a shift in their roles. He had always been the one in the dominant position, acting as an older brother of sorts, but recently, it seemed things had subtly changed. However, he strangely didn’t find their current relationship uncomfortable. The perception he had of Nie Yan in his mind was slowly transforming.

After Nie Yan got into the car, Tang Yao turned on the ignition as it started up without making a sound. It gently floated up, and then they instantly sped away.

Their meeting place was outside of town at a restaurant in the provincial capital. After the car switched over to self-driving mode, it would take them half an hour to get there at most.

The Jaderiver Dining Hall was known as the crown of the provincial capital. In fact, it was a high-class club. Covering an area of over 20,000 square meters, it contained all sorts of entertainment facilities which were readily available. It was the ideal location for parties and get togethers.

The Taiga Black stopped at the dining hall’s parking plaza which

was lined with cars stretching out as far as the eye could see. Although the Taiga Black was a very good car, it wasn't the best. In this entire plaza that contained over several thousand cars, there were at least several dozen that were even more valiant than it.

"Sure are a lot of rich people, huh." Tang Yao turned to Nie Yan and said, "Come on, let's go."

"I definitely can't afford to visit a place like this. You'll have to cover for me, okay?" Nie Yan said.

"Stop acting like you're poor. If you sold off your in-game gold through a blackmarket site, who knows how much money you'd earn? Yet you still have the nerve to freeload off me!"

"I definitely won't sell my gold. Inside the game, I can use it to make even more money. Every single coin can be turned into even more coins," Nie Yan shook his head and replied.

Tang Yao stared at him pensively before nodding his head. "I understand. It's the same as the money I have invested into the stock market. Even if I do spend it, I won't take out more than \$30,000 a month. When I'm working for my dad, I won't even touch it all. Alright, since I freeloaded some gear off you inside the game, everything today is my treat."

Chapter 140 – It's Always The Quiet Ones

As the pair walked into the Jaderiver Dining Hall, they were greeted by a fairly spacious and luxurious lounge. The ceiling, constructed out of a special glass, refracted the incoming sunlight in a peculiar way, causing the various plant life surrounding the rock garden fountain to flourish with vibrant colours.

After passing through the lounge, they walked across a winding hallway before arriving at the meeting place.

It was an outdoor tea garden specially designed to host gatherings of this sort. Right now, a large group of people were lounging in the area, drinking tea and chatting among themselves. They all appeared to be eighteen or nineteen years old, youthful and full of energy. Nie Yan scanned over the crowd with his eyes and recognized several familiar faces, Hao Cheng, Zhao Li, and Guo Huai. Even when he had hit rock-bottom in his past life, these three were among the few who didn't abandon him, which was why he never forgot them. Along with Tang Yao, they were inseparable during their time in middle school.

“Tang Yao, Nie Yan! You two finally arrived.” Hao Cheng was the first to spot them and immediately walked over to greet them. As his eyes fell on Nie Yan, a trace of surprise flashed across his face as he bumped his fist into Nie Yan's chest. “Wow, Kiddo! You've grown sturdier, taller as well! I remember you were such a shrimp back in middle school. Have you been working out recently?”

The Nie Yan in front of him barely resembled the frail and timid boy he knew from the past. Be it his height, figure, or

temperament, everything seemed to have undergone a drastic change. He couldn't help but feel somewhat startled.

Nie Yan smiled and said, "And you haven't changed at all. You're still built like an ox."

Hao Cheng was very tall and quite robust as well. Back when the both of them were in middle school, he had earned a reputation for himself as a fighter by putting quite a few arrogant fellows in their places and served as the captain of the school's mixed martial arts team.

Glancing back at Tang Yao, Hao Cheng broke into a smile and said, "Tang-boy! You've gotten even fatter! Haha!"

"Damn, can't you be a little more tactful," Tang Yao jokingly cursed.

A short while later, Zhao Li and Guo Huai walked up as well. Zhao Li was a little shorter than Hao Cheng. He had a slightly darker complexion and a square chin but was still passable in terms of appearance, making him quite popular among the ladies to the point where he had no lack of admirers during middle school. Guo Huai was the type of person who appeared outwardly cold but cared deeply for others on the inside. With a cold gaze that pierced through his glasses, he looked like a refined intellectual.

"Nie Yan, you came." Guo Huai smiled.

“Hey, Nie Yan, long time no see! The gang’s finally back together, eh?” Zhao Li exclaimed in excitement.

Guo Huai pointed at a nearby sofa and said, “Come, let’s sit over there.”

They sat comfortably on the sofa and resumed their conversation.

While they chatted, a nearby group of girls were constantly shooting glances in their direction. A bit of their chatter leaked out and entered Nie Yan’s and the others’ ears.

“Ah? Is that really Nie Yan?”

“Seems so.”

“Wow, he’s really changed.”

“Right? He looks a lot more handsome now. I remember he used to be so scrawny.”

Nie Yan glanced over at the girls who appeared vaguely familiar and then acknowledged them with a smile. They were caught off guard by this gesture but soon regained their composure; slightly blushing, they smiled and nodded back. It seemed he was no longer the timid and quiet boy they remembered.

He had once been completely oblivious to the world and only knew how to study and go to school. As for when exactly his disposition began changing, he himself was unsure. Nonetheless, the him at present already possessed the wisdom of an adult. He would no longer get nervous over such trivial matters.

As their group chatted along, the conversation gradually progressed to the game that was taking the entire country by storm, Conviction.

“Are you guys playing? Where did you all start out? We should get together next time and train together! You remember the guys from Class 2? A lot of them entered the game together. I heard they’re pretty amazing now. Their best player is already Level 12. Also, a guy from Class 11 started his own guild. It already has several hundred people in it now.” Hao Cheng talked about the game with great enthusiasm.

“Hao Cheng, what class are you playing, what level too?” Zhao Li asked.

“I’m a Warrior, and I’m already Level 11. I usually tag along with a small group of players. Sometimes, we run dungeons together, but we always end up wiping because of the noobs in our team; otherwise, I’d be a bit higher levelled,” Hao Cheng replied.

“I’m a Level 10 Paladin. I ended up joining Radiant Sacred Flame. Sadly, they assigned me to a second-rate team. I’m not good enough to enter their elite one,” Zhao Li said with a wry smile.

Nie Yan was a little shocked by this revelation. He didn't expect Zhao Li to join Radiant Sacred Flame.

“Screw Radiant Sacred Flame! I was nearly killed by those bastards two weeks ago. They kill stole a monster my party found first, then barricaded me and my party in a zone and hunted us down. I was the only one who survived.” Tang Yao's expression soured upon mention of Radiant Sacred Flame.

“Hey, I had nothing to do with that!” Zhao Li hurriedly tried to smooth things over.

“Sigh, I know,” Tang Yao replied. It wasn't worth taking out his anger on a good friend.

“When I log back on, I'll leave the guild. I wasn't enjoying myself there anyway,” Zhao Li said as he patted Tang Yao's shoulder.

“Good Brother!” Tang Yao smiled. This was what being a good friend was all about.

“What about you guys? What level are you three?” Hao Cheng asked. He looked at Guo Huai, Tang Yao, and Nie Yan. Zhao Li's level was high but still within the realm of his expectations. As for the other three, if not outright beginners, he figured they were mediocre players at best.

“I'm also Level 10. I'm a Holy Mage,” Guo Huai replied. His level was also nothing to scoff at.

Hao Cheng's eyes lit up after hearing his response. Guo Huai was Level 10, not to mention a Holy Mage too. Being able to hit such a level signified that he was a decently skilled player. If three strong players were present, then they shouldn't have any problems training as a party of five no matter how much of a burden Tang Yao and Nie Yan might be.

"Tang Yao, what about you?" Hao Cheng asked. He didn't have high hopes for Tang Yao and Nie Yan. After all, these two never gamed much back in middle school. When he had heard earlier from Tang Yao that Nie Yan was also playing Conviction, he was quite amazed.

"Cough, cough..." Tang Yao gave Nie Yan a sideways glance. After seeing Nie Yan give a slight nod of approval, Tang Yao faintly smiled and said, "Arcane Mage, Level 14."

"What, say that again? Level 14...?"

"You're not joking around, right?"

After Tang Yao announced his level, the atmosphere of the conversation suddenly took a strange turn. Hao Cheng, Guo Huai, and Zhao Li were all staring at him with expressions of shock. Considering the average level of the playerbase, reaching Level 10 or 11 was a fairly impressive feat, no doubt, but even then, there were still many players around that range. Level 14, however... now that was a little mind-boggling. At present, such a level would place you right in the top three of the leaderboards.

After for what seemed like half an eternity, they finally regained their composure.

The reaction of these three friends satisfied Tang Yao's vanity. He felt quite pleased with himself.

"Tang-boy, you really are good! You even managed to hide it from us for so long!" Hao Cheng patted Tang Yao on the shoulder.

"Right!? This is so awesome! Wow, Level 14, I still can't believe it. Tang Yao, what's your in-game name?"

"Young Sparrow Hawk," Tang Yao answered.

"Wait, so you're Young Sparrow Hawk? And I was wondering who could be so ferocious at levelling! From now on, we'll just tag along with you. Brothers, what do you say? By the way, do you have any extra equipment lying around that you can pass on?"

"Wait guys, don't misunderstand! I didn't get to that level by myself. I'm also just tagging along with another person," Tang Yao awkwardly cut in.

Hao Cheng stared blankly for a moment, then asked in a tone full of surprise, "You're tagging along with someone else? At your level!? Bullshit! More like others tag along with you! Whatever guild you're a part of, you should leave it immediately."

“Right? Anyone that good can start a guild by themselves,” Guo Huai chimed in. “Look at the type of people who fill the top of the leaderboards: Heaven Breaker, the guild leader of Victorious Return; Sleepy Fox, the guild leader of Holy Empire; and then there’s the guild leaders of Holy Judgement and Battled Crazy Alliance...” He listed all of them out. Only then did everyone discover that excluding Tang Yao, everyone else in the top ten of the leaderboards was currently the leader of a major guild.

“Out of everyone I know, you’re the most amazing! If you make a guild, you can count me in! With your rank on the leaderboards, tons of people will come flocking over! Shoot, I’ll even pull in some of my friends!” Hao Cheng exclaimed.

“Same here,” Zhao Li added.

“In the first batch of people signing up, we’ll be guaranteed to at least get two to three thousand players!” Guo Huai exclaimed. For being known as a person of few words, seeing him talk so much in one sitting was quite amazing.

“Is it really that amazing?” Tang Yao asked in surprise.

“Of course! You’re already in the top three of the leaderboards. Can you imagine how much rallying power you have? With just our classmates, we’d be able to pull in two to three thousand people. The only problem is getting the funds to establish a guild. If we can’t build the guild treasury, then things will be a little troublesome. Without it, we won’t be able to recruit many players beside our friends and schoolmates. If we have it, it’ll show others that we have the resources to support the guild. After the first

batch joins, they'll pull others in, and then the number of people applying will skyrocket." Guo Huai's reasoning seemed fairly sound.

Nie Yan slightly nodded his head. Guo Huai's words did indeed make a lot of sense.

Seeing Zhao Li and Hao Cheng looking at him with amazed expressions, Guo Huai felt slightly embarrassed as he adjusted his glasses and explained, "I've always wanted to establish a guild with some of my friends, but we chose to give up on that dream in the end. We had zero rallying power, and in terms of resources, we were nowhere near the level of those large guilds that have financial backers supporting them from behind the scenes."

At this moment, Nie Yan suddenly recalled a certain piece of information. During their days in middle school, he had once heard that Guo Huai's father owned a supermarket chain. With over two hundred large-scale super markets under one company, their financial resources were solid. So Guo Huai having such an ambition was fairly normal. After all, with Conviction growing ever popular by the day, it had the potential to bring about enormous economic benefits for his father if he started a large successful guild.

"Wow, Guo Huai... You've never once spoken about this in the past. It's just like you to always do things without telling us."

"So, Young Sparrow Hawk, what do you say? Let's start a guild. You can be the leader. Just let me have some stake in the guild. As for funding, you can just let me handle it," Guo Huai asked with an

eager expression. If Tang Yao was able to stay at the top of the level leaderboards, their rallying power would be astonishing. By raising their banners, a steady stream of followers would join their guild. Even if they couldn't grow into a guild as large as Victorious Return or Holy Empire, they would at least be able to expand it to a respectable size.

Tang Yao shook his head and said, "I am creating a guild, but I'm not going to be the leader. As for giving you a stake in the guild, that's not my choice to make."

"Wait, you're not going to be the leader? Then who?" Guo Huai asked in surprise.

"Oh, I'll probably be the leader of the guild in name, but the real leader will be... Nie Yan, because he's the reason why I could level up so quickly," Tang Yao said with a smile. For Guo Huai, Hao Cheng, and Zhao Li, this revelation was even more shocking than Tang Yao being Level 14.

"Nie Yan?"

With amazed expressions, the three shifted their gazes toward Nie Yan who had been silent this whole time. Only then did they realize that, in their excitement, they had completely forgotten to ask Nie Yan about his level. It couldn't possibly be higher than Tang Yao's, could it?

The previously unassuming Nie Yan had suddenly become the focal point of attention.

“Nie Yan, what class do you play and what level are you?”

“That’s right! We never got around to asking you!”

“Alright, stop keeping us in suspense. Hurry up and tell us already!”

Seeing their expressions filled with eager anticipation, Nie Yan chuckled and finally said, “Thief, Level 14.”

“Shoot, even a Thief can reach Level 14? That’s really impressive, but... why don’t I see your name on the leaderboards?” Hao Cheng asked. He knew full well just how difficult it was to level as a Thief. Even the highest level Thief on the leaderboards was only Level 12, and there wasn’t a single Thief in the top ten.

“He chose not to join the leaderboards, so no one knows,” Tang Yao explained.

“No wonder... it’s always the quiet ones that take you by surprise.”

Chapter 141 – Asskickers United

Fortunately, the surprise Tang Yao had given them before acted as a cushion now; otherwise, the shock Hao Cheng, Zhao Li, and Guo Huai received would've been much more severe. Evidently, Nie Yan's level was a result of him levelling together with Tang Yao.

Today was quite eventful. Hao Cheng, Zhao Li, and Guo Huai were able to meet two experts that ranked at the very top of the leaderboards. Not only that, but these experts were also fellow students from the same school. Most surprising of all was that one of them was Nie Yan, a kid who had been mediocre at everything but studying. To their surprise, in the time that they didn't see him, he had transformed into such an outstanding person. They could barely wrap their heads around this fact.

“Back in middle school, we always knew you liked to keep a low-profile. Even when we took tests, you would usually be around tenth or eleventh place, but after the final exams, you suddenly shot up to the top three. It really is in your style to do this kind of stuff. I should've known it was you earlier when Tang Yao said he was just following someone around. Still, we never really thought of you as a gamer, and rightfully so since you never played any in the past. Who could've known that, as soon as you got your hands on one, you'd be so good at it. Yet, even when you can place in the top three, you still choose to stay hidden. I guess compared to you, we brothers just aren't as restrained or skilled,” Guo Huai shook his head and said in a dry manner.

Guo Huai himself was pretty low-key as well. That was why, out of all his schoolmates, only his four best friends—Nie Yan, Tang

Yao, Zhao Li, and Hao Cheng—knew that his family was wealthy. Normally, he was considered the most unassuming out of the bunch, but now, it seemed that title belonged to Nie Yan.

“Since it’s like this, I guess the five of us are pretty strong. So what do you say, shall we make a guild?” Hao Chen eagerly asked. His old man ran a martial arts center that plenty of patrons frequented, meaning if they were to start a guild, he would be able to pull in quite a few people.

“I’m up for it. How about we give it a try? I can probably recruit most of my classmates,” Zhao Li said. Although he didn’t have much to offer, he was a natural smoothtalker. There was almost no one he didn’t have a good relation with, particularly with those of the opposite gender.

“If we’re making a guild, then we’ll have to do it properly. At the very least, we need to make a big splash in the game’s community. As for having a stake in the ownership of the guild, you guys can discuss among yourselves and come to me with a proposal,” Nie Yan said after thinking for a while. If he shared the burden of management with his brothers, he would no longer have to worry about being overwhelmed by guild affairs, leaving him free to focus on his own matters. Guo Huai, Hao Cheng, and Zhao Li all showed promising potential. They were young and full of drive, not to mention they had all chosen the same starting point. Their first step was to bring all of their friends and schoolmates into the guild, since there would be a sense of familiarity if everyone already knew each other. And even though it would be impossible to prevent moles from infiltrating their guild, this would at least ensure that their ranks would remain pure for a little while. Besides, as youths in their prime, they were generally better at

playing video games than older adults.

Zhao Li quickly waved his hands and said, “No, it’s fine. I don’t want any stakes in ownership. I’m okay with just helping out. We’re all brothers here anyway, right?”

Rebuking Zhao Li’s statement, Guo Huai shook his head and said, “It’s exactly because we’re brothers that we’re all deciding these things now.” Since his own family owned a large business chain, he himself had seen too many situations where entire families fell apart because shares weren’t properly divided up, siblings becoming sworn enemies, feuds lasting for decades...

“Guo Huai, tell us. How should we divide up the guild?” Nie Yan asked. In the field of business, Guo Huai seemed a tad bit more knowledgeable.

“I’ve thought this over for a bit. Since we’re relying on your and Tang Yao’s popularity to establish the guild, the both of you combined should hold 85% of the shares while the three of us receive 5% each. When the official in-game currency exchange begins, I can then invest some funds into the guild... but probably not too much. If this whole thing ends up dead in the water, then you won’t have to worry about paying me back. If it does succeed, you can pay me back through the return on investment,” Guo Huai explained. He wasn’t asking for much and was content with only a 5% stake in the guild.

“If they’re fine with 5%, so am I. Just please, for the love of all that is holy, don’t make me manage the guild affairs,” Tang Yao said. He was inherently a very lazy person, and the mere thought

of all the work that came with managing a guild nearly scared him half to death.

After pondering for a moment, Nie Yan finally spoke up. “Alright, guild management will be handed over to Guo Huai while Hao Cheng and Zhao Li can provide assistance. Tang Yao and I will be responsible for creating the guild’s main dungeon running team.” Guo Huai and the others had no way of knowing just how much their 5% would be worth in the future. Moreover, there were still many areas where he would need to rely on them, and only by having a personal stake in the project would they strive to give it their full effort. Considering how much he interacted with them in his past life, he had long since fully understood each of their natures. Most important of all, compared to two lifetimes of friendship, a 5% stake in the guild was nothing.

“I’m fine with this.” Tang Yao nodded in approval.

“Then, this is what we’ve all agreed upon? Alright. Our first focus is to quickly raise our levels, especially Tang Yao’s. So long as he firmly holds onto his position at the top of the leaderboards, there’ll be a constant stream of players looking to join us. So, Tang Yao, for now, all you need to do is focus on levelling,” Guo Huai said. This point was extremely crucial; otherwise, the rest of their plans would end up falling through.

“Don’t worry. When the servers reopen later, I’ll climb even higher in the leaderboards and knock Heaven Breaker out of first place,” Tang Yao confidently said.

“Really? That quickly?” Hao Cheng asked, sounding a little

startled.

“Just where the hell are you grinding?!” Hao Cheng, Zhao Li, and Guo Huai were quite puzzled.

“Now that, you’ll have to ask Nie Yan to find out. Don’t worry though, after this whole guild thing has settled down, I promise I’ll take you guys levelling with me. I guarantee all of you will be able to reach Level 15 in one day,” Tang Yao confidently boasted while patting his chest. He then turned to look at Nie Yan who didn’t seem to oppose his idea.

“Alright, these are your words, not mine!”

“Don’t break your promise. If it’s like this, I won’t have to worry about raising my level. I’ll start recruiting first thing when I log back on!” Hao Cheng excitedly exclaimed.

“You all can go recruit members. After Tang Yao and I finish levelling, I’ll set up the guild treasury,” Nie Yan said. After establishing a guild, having a proper treasury was very important.

The guild treasury was a symbol of a guild’s might. Containing hundreds if not thousands of pieces of gear for every class and level, skill books, and other items, it would be open to any member of the guild. After accumulating a certain amount of contribution, these members could redeem their merit points for these items. When they eventually outgrew their current set of gear, they could simply return the pieces to the treasury and exchange them for higher level replacements. However, if a piece was lost, then a

certain amount of merit points would be deducted. At the same time, donating to the guild treasury would increase a member's contribution to the guild.

Whether the treasury was overflowing or desolate would directly impact the growth of the guild. As a consequence, every guild leader would need to pour in an immense amount of resources when establishing it; otherwise, if the treasury wasn't up to snuff, a mass exodus of members was very likely to occur. On the other end of the spectrum, the larger the treasury and the better the quality of items within it, the easier it would be to convince new recruits to stay. When these new recruits spent a certain amount of time in the guild, they would start developing a sense of belonging. After which they themselves would start donating to the treasury to increase their contribution within the guild. At the end of the day, everything in the treasury belonged to the guild, and it was simply loaned out to its members.

Whether a guild would prosper or die was heavily dependant on the state of its treasury.

"You have the resources to set up the treasury right now?" Guo Huai asked in surprise.

"Pretty much. Bronze and Silver-grade equipment aren't particularly expensive, so I should be able to gather plenty." If the guild had several thousand pieces of Bronze-grade equipment and several hundred pieces of Silver-grade equipment, then it should be enough to incentivize most of their members to increase their contribution within the guild.

“Right, getting Bronze and Silver-grade equipment is a good start. Right now, most players are still wearing White or Bronze-grade equipment while Silver-grade equipment is rare. How much can you gather?” Guo Huai asked.

Everyone focussed their attention on Nie Yan because his following words would determine the future of the entire guild.

“I’m willing to spend 20 gold on purchasing equipment. I also have several hundred pieces of Silver-grade equipment and a few dozen pieces of Gold-grade equipment in my storage that I plan to add to the treasury. That’s the best I can do,” Nie Yan said. He had the potion shop as a steady source of income. As for the equipment, it was everything that he had accumulated from hunting Leaders, Sub-Elites, and Elites, and it was safe to say that many more such items would keep coming in.

Hearing Nie Yan say 20 gold, even Tang Yao was taken by surprise. They all sucked in a breath of cold air. They knew Nie Yan was amazing, but they never expected him to be this amazing. Even if it was a large guild, they still wouldn’t be able to bring out that kind of money, let alone so many pieces of Silver and Gold-grade equipment. Nie Yan’s resources were truly profound.

“Awesome! With that kind of money, you can buy plenty of high-quality Silver-grade equipment. If our treasury is filled with high-quality items, it’ll be much easier to convince our members to contribute to the guild. If the first batch of recruits stay, we’ll be able to attract even more player interest. Then, once we form the main dungeon running team and the secondary teams, we’ll be able to get a steady stream of items into the treasury. We’ll use the

items the main team collects to develop the secondary teams, then the items the secondary teams collect will develop the rest of the guild members,” Guo Huai said. He had already researched many things pertaining to managing a guild, so he was extremely knowledgeable about these things.

“It seems we’re going to have a better start than expected.” Hao Cheng took a deep breath, feeling slightly overwhelmed. He originally believed they were going to start off dirt poor. Never did he expect that Nie Yan was actually filthy rich.

“Alright, now we have to decide the guild’s name,” Guo Huai said.

“Leave that to me, I’m pretty good at naming! How does Phoenix Bathed in Fire sound?” Tang Yao suggested in high spirits.

“Won’t do. That name’s probably already taken.”

“Shameless! How could some scoundrel steal the guild name I thought up!”

“Ha,” Zhao Li snorted. “You’re calling them shameless?”

“Well, let’s keep thinking.”

The four scratched their ears, not knowing what to name the guild.

“Let’s call it Unhindered Through the Heavens!” Tang Yao suggested.

“That’s already been taken.”

“...”

“How about Asskickers United? Anyone who joins our guild can kick ass! When we sweep through Calore, and then the entire Viridian Empire, we’ll really kick ass!” Tang Yao said in excitement. “I don’t believe for a second that this name has already been taken!”

“That sounds a bit tacky, but I guess that’s fine too,” Guo Huai said.

“At least it’ll make us stand out.” Hao Chen was in favour of it but wasn’t completely convinced.

Hearing their discussion, Nie Yan raised an eyebrow in surprise. In his past life, his father had also made a guild, the War God Tribe, and now, Tang Yao had come up with Asskickers United. Like with his father’s guild, the name was overbearing, but it was definitely suitable considering Tang Yao’s personality.

“We’ll call it Asskickers United then,” Nie Yan decided.

“Alright, I guess that’ll be our guild name then.” Guo Huai supported the decision.

In a time where many firms were hungrily eyeing for opportunities to expand, on a table in a restaurant, five unassuming youths were enthusiastically discussing their plans for the future. They all came from the same impoverished backgrounds, having absolutely nothing and starting from scratch. However, after several years apart, they had gathered once again. Their days of gloom would soon be coming to an end. The stillness in their lives would wash away. Experiencing meteoric success, they would be able to laugh proudly under the heavens.

Even though everything was so average and mundane and many people were the same, what the future had in store for them would be quite eventful.

Chapter 142 – Sent Flying

Guo Huai, Hao Cheng, and Zhao Li were in high spirits as they discussed the future of Asskickers United. In the meantime, Tang Yao became increasingly full of hot air, proclaiming, “What’s Radiant Sacred Flame? I’ve never heard of them before! Victorious Return? We’ll wipe their asses off the floor and become the top guild in the empire!” Listening to his rampant boasting, the others couldn’t help but roll their eyes. They hadn’t even enacted any of their plans, yet he was already acting like they had accomplished everything.

Nie Yan chuckled. This was just part of who Tang Yao was. His carefree and happy-go-lucky personality would always liven the mood wherever he went.

While they happily chatted, a tall and slender woman with an enchanting appearance walked over. With skin as fair as jade, she wore a beautiful qipao that did well to accentuate her elegant figure. Her name was Shen Yue, their class president back in middle school. She was also fully deserving of being called the prettiest girl in their class, having no less than ten secret admirers. Among the five in their group, Guo Huai also happened to be one of them.

“Oh? Class Pres, is there anything you need?” Zhao Li smiled at Shen Yue after noticing her coming over.

Just a moment ago, Guo Huai was perfectly fine, but as soon as he raised his head and saw her walking over, his face blushed red all over and he grew timid and reserved. Noticing his reaction, the

rest of the guys laughed and smiled. Nie Yan was also sympathetic. The feelings a person had for their first love were usually the hardest to forget.

“Haven’t you five been hiding in this corner for long enough? We have at least thirty classmates gathered here, yet none of you are going over to talk to them. Look over there. You can’t keep our young ladies waiting forever, can you? They’re starting to get impatient. Nie Yan, you’ve sure grown tall and—Oh? Guo Huai, what’s wrong? Your face is all red. Do you have a fever coming on?” Shen Yue asked in a concerned manner.

“Ah, don’t worry. He was just happy to see everyone again after such a long time, including you, Class Pres, so he drank a bit of alcohol.” Nie Yan and the guys replied in his place. How could they abandon him in this kind of situation?

Guo Huai shot over a grateful glance at his four brothers. This was what being true friends was all about. Even though they constantly poked fun at one another in private, if trouble ever arose, they would have each other’s backs. If one of them encountered a powerful foe, then they would all band together to fight that foe.

Their strong bond was formed by persevering through many hardships together.

“Guo Huai, don’t drink so much,” Shen Yue scolded half-heartedly.

“Yeah, I’ll keep that in mind.” Guo Huai was flustered but still managed to somehow get his words out smoothly.

“Anyway, you guys should get off that couch and talk with everyone else. The gathering is about to start. It’s better if we don’t dally any longer since many people here still have to work in the afternoon,” Shen Yue said. Although they were still high schoolers, many of them worked part time or even held multiple jobs to earn money, so their free time was quite limited.

Nie Yan was the first to stand up and said, “Come on, let’s go over right now.”

“Sure.”

The other four also stood up.

“Hey, Nie Yan. If those girls over there surround me, you’ll help pull me out, right?” Zhao Li asked with a wry smile.

“Eh, now how could I do that? There’s no way I can deprive those young ladies of your presence. You can handle this one by yourself. Who told you to be so popular?” Nie Yan chuckled. Back in middle school, there was no shortage of assertive and lively girls. Even Zhao Li’s social prowess couldn’t save him from being overwhelmed by all these girls.

“Nie Yan, please don’t hang me out to dry like this!”

“Hey, you don’t know how well you have it. Some of us can’t ever be this popular with the ladies. Just take a look at Tang Yao,” Nie Yan replied.

Their small group chatted while they walked toward the others. In the past, their group of five only hung out together because they seemed to get along well. However, now, a subtle change had occurred. Nie Yan seemed to have become the core of the group.

Guo Huai, Zhao Li, and Hao Cheng were amazed to discover that their group dynamic had changed. The atmosphere surrounding Nie Yan had completely changed. He was now able to easily influence those around him, and they were starting to take note of his suggestions and opinions. Although he had also been a person with strong viewpoints back in middle school, he never really conveyed them and rather kept to himself instead.

Having not seen them in over ten years, Nie Yan only had vague impressions of his classmates from middle school, so he could only recall them by going off of brief interactions. Nevertheless, being as well-versed as he was, he was able to converse with them with ease.

His classmates were amazed by his transformation. In the past, he was scrawny, an excellent student, and had a personality that could be regarded as good-natured, but he was often lost in his own world and rarely interacted with others. However, now, he was much more robust. They could even faintly discern the outlines of his muscles underneath his shirt. This led to many of his female classmates, who were normally quite bold and daring, being struck in a daze. Moreover, he was chatting with others in a carefree

manner, and his temperament appeared to have completely changed.

Such a stark contrast caused even Guo Huai, Hao Cheng, and Zhao Li to view Nie Yan in a new light. With this change, they began believing that their plan of establishing a guild might actually succeed.

“Hey, Guo Huai! Long time no see.” A muscular youth in a white jersey with somewhat handsome features walked over to Nie Yan and his group while carrying two glasses of orange juice.

Upon seeing the person that called out to him, Guo Huai’s expression immediately darkened.

When Nie Yan saw this person, although they seemed a little familiar, he just couldn’t recall who they were.

“Who is he?” Nie Yan asked Tang Yao in a low voice.

“You forgot him? He’s Chu Zhenfei from Class 11. He was part of the basketball team. I heard he learned some Muay Thai. He’s also one of the guys chasing after Class Pres. When he heard she was organizing a class reunion from some of our classmates, he decided to invite himself in,” Tang Yao whispered back.

Nie Yan suddenly remembered that there was such a person. If he recalled correctly, Chu Zhenfei’s family owned a car dealership. Even though he was somewhat wealthy, he was far from being

anywhere near Guo Huai's level. Only, no one knew this because Guo Huai didn't like to reveal his family background.

He also recalled that a certain incident had occurred during the class reunion in his past life because of Chu Zhenfei. Ever since catching wind that Guo Huai liked Shen Yue back in middle school, Chu Zhenfei would always give him a hard time for it. Fast forward to the class reunion, Chu Zhenfei had asked around and found out that Guo Huai had been allergic to oranges since childhood. So, for the express purpose of making trouble for Guo Huai, Chu Zhenfei had sought him out and forced him to toast to a glass of orange juice.

At that time, for the sake of not losing face in front of Shen Yue, Guo Huai had downed the whole glass. Even though he appeared fine for the rest of the reunion, after returning home, he fell seriously ill and ended up hospitalized for two full days. However, Guo Huai wasn't the type of person to take grievances lying down. He didn't let Chu Zhenfei off lightly either. Immediately after being discharged from the hospital, he brought some hired help to ambush Chu Zhenfei and beat him so badly that he had to lay in a hospital bed for several months. That was when Chu Zhenfei finally came to learn of Guo Huai's background. Even though their son had been beaten half-to-death, Chu Zhenfei's family didn't dare to let out so much as a fart for fear of further retaliation, and Chu Zhenfei himself developed a deep fear of Guo Huai. Whenever they encountered each other after that incident, Chu Zhenfei would always make himself scarce. The most dangerous dogs tended to be the ones that didn't bark before biting. Even though Guo Huai was normally quite reserved and easy-going, that definitely did not mean he was easy to bully. When he truly got angry, everyone should be afraid.

Nie Yan actually admired Guo Huai's temperament because it somewhat resembled his own. In his past life, Cao Xu had brought his family to ruin. Both of his parents passed away, and even after that, Cao Xu continued to suppress him. Under those circumstances, it was reasonable to believe that Cao Xu would never allow him to rise back up. So, he endured everything and secluded himself. He pretended to have given up, boozing himself up by day without a care for his own health and loitering around bars by night. He gradually got Cao Xu to lower his guard, and then finally, on that fateful day, he bit back and ended Cao Xu's life with a bullet through the head.

What was the method of a truly formidable character? It was the ability to patiently bide their time for that perfect moment, seek out an opportunity to launch a counterattack, and then finish off the enemy with a single strike!

Tang Yao, Hao Cheng, and Zhao Li didn't know Guo Huai was allergic to oranges. They only knew that he generally did not eat or drink anything with oranges in it. Otherwise, when they saw Chu Zhenfei walking over with a glass of orange juice to give Guo Huai trouble, to say nothing of Nie Yan, none of them would have let him make that toast.

Knowing their history together, Hao Cheng frowned when he saw Chu Zhenfei walking over and was looking for an appropriate time to take action.

"Guo Huai, I know we've had some conflicts in the past, but we've both already graduated. Let bygones be bygones. What do you say? I came here today to apologize to you. Here, let's have a

toast,” Chu Zhenfei offered the glass of orange juice. “Alcohol is bad for our health, so we’ll substitute with orange juice instead,” Chu Zhenfei said as he pretended to act in a sincere manner.

“Right, it’s better to drink less alcohol. Other beverages are perfectly fine to toast with,” Shen Yue chimed in. She knew Chu Zhenfei had feelings for her, as did Guo Huai, so she was worried a conflict might occur. She never expected Chu Zhenfei had actually come over to apologize to Guo Huai. Honestly, she was a little impressed, and her unfavourable impression of him began to somewhat change.

“Chu Zhenfei, are you sure you want to make me drink this orange juice?” Guo Huai coldly stared at him.

Seeing the expression in Guo Huai’s eyes, Chu Zhenfei suddenly felt a slight chill run down his spine. However, he wasn’t willing to back down as he said, “I came here to sincerely apologize to you. I don’t wish for the both of us to linger on our past grievances even after graduating.”

“Guo Huai, since Chu Zhenfei is apologizing, I think you should just forgive him,” Shen Yue said while standing by Guo Huai’s side. Even though they hadn’t met in a long time, she still had a favourable impression of him in her heart. From her memory, he was a gentle person who was always willing to forgive others.

Nie Yan had been observing everything this whole time. In the end, Guo Huai was only a teenager. Regarding matters of affection, he was still too young and inexperienced. For the sake of preserving Shen Yue’s opinion of him, he wouldn’t refuse this

toast.

“Fine, I’ll toast.” Guo Huai reached out and grabbed hold of the glass of orange juice.

Just as he was about to drink it, Nie Yan stepped in and stopped him. After taking the glass from his hand, he smiled at Chu Zhenfei and said in an unhurried manner, “I’ll drink this glass on Guo Huai’s behalf. You know perfectly well that he’s allergic to oranges, yet you’re still trying to make him drink it. Aren’t you being a little too insincere?”

“Who are you? Mind your own goddamn business!” Chu Zhenfei cursed. He didn’t expect his true intentions to be seen through so accurately.

“Guo Huai, is this true?” Shen Yue stared at him with a surprised expression.

“Of course. He’s been allergic to oranges since childhood,” Nie Yan replied.

Shen Yue wasn’t dumb. After this fact came out, she was pretty quick on the uptake. Stamping her feet, she berated Guo Huai. “Guo Huai, how could you be so dumb? If you can’t drink orange juice, then wouldn’t it be fine if you just refused?” She then turned around and coldly stared at Chu Zhenfei. “Chu Zhenfei, you’re no longer welcome here. I ask that you kindly leave.”

“Dammit, you bastard! This is all your fault!” Chu Zhenfei only wanted to mess with Guo Huai. He never expected to be caught in the act. With his plans backfiring on him, he flew into a fit of rage and pinned everything on the one who had stopped him. In his anger, he sent a kick to Nie Yan’s head. Chu Zhenfei was a pretty big guy, so the power coming from such a kick would be absolutely terrifying.

When Hao Cheng saw Chu Zhenfei act, he was about to intervene and beat him up. However, he was halted in his tracks as he saw an amazing scene suddenly occurring before his eyes.

Nie Yan effortlessly dodged Chu Zhenfei’s kick and countered with a spinning back kick. As his foot planted itself into Chu Zhenfei’s stomach, he sent Chu Zhenfei’s body flying into the air before it finally crashed into the liquor table half-a-room across from him.「Crash!」The sound of bottles shattering and wood breaking filled the air. The table had split in half from the force of Chu Zhenfei’s body crashing into it. Suddenly, the entire place turned deathly silent.

Everyone wore shocked expressions.

“Holy crap!” Hao Chen was astonished by Nie Yan’s kick. To send a man of that weight flying halfway across the garden, just how much force was required? Even he, who had trained in mixed martial arts for so long, found such a scene inconceivable!

Chapter 143 – Basic Magic Bomb

That single kick shook the hearts of everyone present. Despite the drastic change in his appearance and temperament, most of Nie Yan's former classmates still viewed him as that same scrawny kid that looked like he could be toppled over by a gust of wind. However, now, they had just witnessed him send a 100 kg man flying. This huge discrepancy shattered any such notions they held of him.

Even Hao Cheng, who had trained in mixed martial arts since childhood, couldn't say with absolute confidence that he would be able to throw out a kick with such force. Sending an average man flying with a kick was already quite difficult, to say nothing of a tall, muscular basketball player like Chu Zhenfei who also trained in Muay Thai. Nie Yan had been so fast that Hao Cheng felt that if he had been on the receiving end of that kick, he wouldn't fare much better than Chu Zhenfei and would have likely also been sent flying.

All of his former classmates stared blankly at the scene, their minds shaken by indescribable shock, and the same thought emerged in their collective mind. Was this person really Nie Yan?

As for Chu Zhenfei, after crashing into the table, he attempted to stagger back to his feet but soon collapsed back down. He felt as if his organs and bowels had been shifted by the force of that kick as he lay on a bed of shattered wine glasses and liquor bottles gasping in pain.

“Don't bother trying to get up. You won't be able to for the next

half-hour anyway.” Nie Yan’s voice cut across the courtyard while carrying over a tone of cold indifference.

If it had been an ordinary person, his kick would have resulted in broken ribs and internal bleeding. More shocking was that he had actually held back. Chu Zhenfei frequently exercised, so his physique was pretty durable, not to mention he also trained in Muay Thai. If there was one thing Muay Thai practitioners were known for, it was the ability to withstand powerful blunt force impacts. Even then, Chu Zhenfei was lucky to get off with just minor bruising. For him to be able to stand up after thirty minutes was simply leniency on Nie Yan’s part.

A brief moment later, wait staff along with security came hurrying over.

Nie Yan turned to Guo Huai and patted his shoulder. “The way you and I handle matters is a bit different. With a small fry like him, it’s better to be direct and efficient. As for Shen Yue, if you don’t have the courage to start pursuing the woman you love now, how do you expect to accomplish anything in the future?”

He had spoken these words quite clearly, so the whole crowd was able to hear his advice.

Standing next to him, Shen Yue was at a loss. Even though she had a good opinion of Guo Huai, she had never once thought of the two of them being a couple.

Guo Huai glanced at her before contemplating these words in

silence.

Nie Yan faintly smiled, then stared at the security and staff members who were coming over. "I'll leave those guys to you."

"It's the least I can do," Guo Huai nodded his head. He had been enlightened by Nie Yan's advice as if a strong gust had blown in and cleared away all of his doubts. If he truly wished to become a formidable character, silently enduring wasn't always the best course of action. Sometimes, he needed to be able to act unabashed and freely seize opportunities without a care for social trivialities. If he already knew what he wanted and needed to do, then he should simply go forth and do it already.

The security and staff members were initially walking toward them in an aggressive manner, but their attitudes instantly turned one hundred and eighty degrees when they noticed Guo Huai among the group,

"Young Master, when did you arrive?" one of the security personnel bowed and asked with a fawning expression.

"I came here with my former classmates for a reunion. Deal with the mess here, and help us change locations. As for him over there, send him over to the infirmary," Guo Huai ordered in a deep tone that gave the impression of a lofty figure ordering a subordinate.

"Right away, sir. We'll immediately prepare some new arrangements," that security personnel replied.

All of his former classmates stared on with widened eyes. What kind of place was this? It was the Jadewater Dining Hall, the crown of the provincial capital and the most luxurious entertainment establishment of the city! Nearly every celebrity and high official would come here to host their gatherings. Just this place alone was worth well over several billion yuan while the financial powers behind it couldn't even be assessed. They never expected that this dining hall was actually run by Guo Huai's family. No wonder they had been able to host their gathering here! In the past, Guo Huai had never revealed his background and was usually quite reserved, so everyone always believed that he came from an average household. Who could have known that his family's background would actually be so frightening!

"It's fine. The reunion's already ruined, and I assume everyone here is no longer in the mood to stick around much longer. Tang Yao and I should probably get going too. Let's meet again inside the game. You can get in touch with me by messaging Tang Yao." Nie Yan didn't actually seem all too surprised. Then again, he had known this since long ago. In his past life, Guo Huai had attempted to use his family's influence to protect Nie Yan. Unfortunately, even though his family was one of the most powerful in the province, they were nowhere near capable of resisting Cao Xu who had amassed an immense fortune in both the real world and Conviction. However, Nie Yan had still received Guo Huai's favour.

"Alright." Guo Huai nodded.

Since Nie Yan and Tang Yao were leaving, there was no meaning in making the rest of his former classmates stay, so many of them said their goodbyes and left one after another. A few snobbish

classmates took advantage of the opportunity to approach Guo Huai and curry some favour. There were also several brazen female classmates who sought out Nie Yan before he left because his performance today was simply too shocking.

He had no interest whatsoever in these girls. However, for better or worse, they were still former classmates, so he put up an agreeable front and chatted with them for a while.

“We’re leaving.” Finally, Nie Yan and Tang Yao bid their farewells and left the dining hall as well.

They both entered the car, and after starting it up, the Taiga Black drove out of the parking plaza and took the exit to the highway where they sped along home.

Back at the parking plaza, several remaining classmates had seen the pair enter the Taiga Black and drive off.

“Wow, that’s a Taiga Black. I heard they cost upwards of several hundred million yuan. Not only Guo Huai, but it turns out Tang Yao and Nie Yan were rich too!”

“No kidding. How could we have missed this in the past!”

“Besides Hao Cheng, who likes to fight, and Zhao Li, who likes to make friends, I guess the rest of them really kept to themselves.” In fact, Zhao Li and Hao Cheng were the only two to catch their eye back in middle school. As for Guo Huai, Nie Yan, and Tang

Yao, they were people that none of them ever bothered paying attention to until now.

“Nie Yan’s kick back there was really too fierce. Chu Zhenfei was actually sent flying. I’ve met several Taekwondo black belts before, and even they aren’t as amazing as he is.”

The group of girls continued chatting about what had happened today. For what should’ve just been a normal class reunion, the events that unfolded were simply too shocking.

What these former classmates thought about him was of no importance to Nie Yan. When he had been in dire straits in his past life, these people avoided him like the plague for fear of bringing trouble upon themselves. So, in this life, why would he pay heed to them? Nonetheless, he didn’t regret attending this reunion today. Not only was he able to reunite with his other brothers, they were also able to get together and finalize their plans for establishing a guild.

Tang Yao dropped Nie Yan off before heading off to work. After returning home, he spent the next few hours working out and studying. When the clock struck five, he put on his gaming helmet and entered the game once more.

Since he had almost depleted his supply from the day before, Nie Yan first headed through the transfer point to Tasoyi Village to restock on Smoke Powder.

After stepping out of the transfer point, he walked along the

main street before stopping at a certain tree where he climbed up a wooden ladder. After reaching the top, he saw the entrance of a tree house and walked up to it. Its appearance wasn't much different from how he remembered. After decades of erosion by wind and rain, the wooden door was filled with numerous cracks and marks. At the very top, hanging from a wooden nail, a sign read:「Tinkerer Mulberry Sandford's Shop」

Tinkerer Mulberry was an eccentric old fellow. He always wore a black robe and often hid himself in the back of his shop, completely engrossed by his research. Among Intermediate Tinkerer NPCs, the items he created were unmatched. The Smoke Powder Nie Yan had made Tang Yao purchase yesterday was also created by him.

Most players would be Level 20–30 by the time they discovered this place. Moreover, the items sold here were excessively expensive, costing anywhere from several gold to upward of several dozen. These luxury items could only be afforded by a select few in the playerbase who were wealthy enough.

Nie Yan pushed the door open and entered the building. At the corner of the shop behind the counter, the door to the back room was open. There, he saw Tinkerer Mulberry working at his research desk. He couldn't actually see the old man, only a pair of aged haggard hands resembling tree bark tinkering away.

“Excuse me, do you need anything?” A hoarse voice rang out from the back room. Instead of getting up to welcome his new customer, he stayed in the back unwilling to distract himself from his work.

Afterwards, a shop window appeared in front of Nie Yan's eyes. After scanning through the list of goods, he saw that he could only afford several items on the first row. Smoke Powder and Intermediate Flash Powder, two relatively useful items, were among them. The former cost 5 gold for a batch while the latter cost 3. Intermediate Flash Powder was nearly identical to Basic Flash Powder except it was effective against monsters Level 30 and below. He bought a batch of each, setting aside the Flash Powder to use in case of emergency. As for the rest of the items he could afford, he wasn't able to make use of them for the time being.

He took one more look at the window before his eyes fell on the last item on the list. It was a set of black metal balls. At first glance, they appeared completely ordinary, but he knew they were an item that would make levelling much easier.

Basic Magic Bomb

Requirements: 10 Intelligence

Description: Deals 200 damage in a 3-meter radius and applies the Tinkerer's Curse. Effective against Ordinary, Leader, and Sub-Elite monsters Level 50 and under. Deal 300% bonus damage on Machine-type monsters. Warning: Do not use against other players. Otherwise, the user will receive the Painful Death Curse (Inflicts instant death. -10% All Stats Permanently).

Basic Magic Bombs dealt substantial damage, but they were quite pricey at 10 gold for a batch of twenty. For the time being, very few players were capable of affording such an expensive item. Even Nie Yan would be prudent about using them. He couldn't afford them now, but when he had more money, he would come back to buy them. Even though using them on common mobs was a bit of a waste, they were quite effective against Machine-type mobs, especially if he was going to Everlasting City to level.

As for the Painful Death Curse, if these Magic Bombs were used to attack players, then the user would eat a bitter fruit like no other because the curse would never fail to activate. This was also a type of restriction; otherwise, if this item could be used in PvP, it would be too overpowered.

After purchasing the Smoke Powder and Flash Powder, Nie Yan left the shop and headed back to Calore through the transfer point.

Upon stepping out, he received a call from Tang Yao.

「They've contacted me. Hao Cheng is called Violet Berserk Blade, Zhao Li is called Little Worm, and Guo Huai is called Watchful Snail. I had them establish the guild. We put it under your name, while I'll be the guild leader. After creating the guild, they immediately started recruiting members. Oh, and I already managed to convince Yu Lan and her team to join.」

「Guo Huai is good at handling this kind of work, so it's fine if we let him take care of it.」

「Go check the forums on the official website. Guo Huai already made a post.」

Hearing this, Nie Yan immediately opened the forums on the Conviction website, then entered the board for the Viridian Empire. There, he saw the top viewed thread was surprisingly for their guild. The title read:「Arcane Mage, Young Sparrow Hawk, Soars to the Heavens with the Sudden Emergence of His New Guild, Asskickers United」

There was a ton of discussion in the thread, many asking where Young Sparrow Hawk was levelling or if he would be able to overthrow Heaven Breaker on the leaderboards. It quickly reached several hundred thousand views, and many of them showed their support for Tang Yao in the comments section. Quite a few were tired of the endless injustices caused by Victorious Return. Even if they occupied the number one position in the Viridian Empire,

there were countless players who suffered grievances under them, causing a resentment among the playerbase to bubble forth. If someone was able to gather these players, then they would be able to challenge Victorious Return's rule.

「What's our next step?」Tang Yao asked.「Are we going to go back and meet up with Guo Huai and the others? After all, we just created the guild, so there's a lot of work to be done.」

「None of that is important to us right now. We're going to focus on levelling first and foremost. The best way you can support them is by constantly raising your level and knocking Heaven Breaker off of first place on the leaderboards,」Nie Yan replied in a calm tone.

Chapter 144 – Lord-Class Scaled Frog

Nie Yan left Calore and sprinted back toward the Scaled Frog zone. Those Elites should have respawned.

「Be careful, don't get yourself accidentally killed while I'm not around,」Nie Yan cautioned. Tang Yao being all alone was extremely dangerous.

「Don't worry. I haven't seen any monsters nearby. I'm perfectly safe.」

「Give me your coordinates.」

「23828.23875.385」

Heading for these coordinates, Nie Yan eventually met back with Tang Yao in the forest.

“Did you buy more Smoke Powder?” Tang Yao asked. After using so many pouches yesterday, there probably wasn't much left.

“Yeah, I did,” Nie Yan replied.

“Hah, killing Level 30 Elites is pretty costly.” Tang Yao sighed in sorrow at the thought of how much gold was spent solely on Smoke Powder.

“Well, we can make it back by killing them. Remember those recipes that dropped yesterday? After giving them to the Alchemists on the second floor, they’re earning the Starry Night Potion Shop at least several gold a day. It’d be even better if we could find some top-quality gear that we can equip.”

“Your shop really makes that much?” Tang Yao asked in an amazed tone. Could a few recipes really bring in so much gold?

“Of course.”

“We should find some more recipes then! We’ll be rolling in money!” Tang Yao exclaimed in excitement. Elites already had a pretty high drop rate, not to mention Beast-type monsters like Scaled Frogs were the most likely to drop Alchemy Recipes. He did some calculations. If they spent the whole day farming Elites and Sub-Elites, then they would be able to obtain at least three recipes.

The pair headed to the nearest Elite. After arriving at their destination, they still used the same method from yesterday. Nie Yan laid down the Smoke Powder, and then, Tang Yao would barrage the Scaled Frog with magic from a distance.

Thirty minutes later, the Scaled Frog collapsed to ground.

“How far are you from levelling up?” Nie Yan asked. He was surprised to see Tang Yao not immediately levelling up after killing the Elite.

“I’m still 1% away,” Tang Yao said after glancing at his experience bar.

“Ah good, then you’re not far off. Come on, let’s go find the next one,” Nie Yan nodded and said. Tang Yao reaching Level 15 would be a heavy blow to Heaven Breaker. At the very least, it would signify to the rest of the playerbase that Tang Yao had the ability to overthrow Heaven Breaker from his throne. With this happening, Guo Huai and the others would have a much easier time recruiting members for the guild.

Nie Yan had cautioned Guo Huai and the others that they had to be very selective of who they recruited into their guild. Otherwise, they would run a much higher risk of being infiltrated by moles. It would be quite a pain if their internal movements were being monitored and reported back to the major guilds, especially since they were still in the initial stages of establishing themselves. When they actually had the ability to defend themselves, only then would it be okay to fully open the doors for new members.

As they travelled through the gaps between the trees and headed for the next Elite, they were suddenly brought to a halt by a strong gust of wind that came from deep within the forest.

「Croak! Croak!」The deep sound reverberated through the air. This was the call of a Scaled Frog, but it wasn’t from an Elite. It was possibly even higher!

“W-what was that?” Tang Yao asked with a shocked expression.

Nie Yan attempted to recall where he had heard this sound before. A brief moment later, his face suddenly lit up with joy and he exclaimed, “It’s a Lord-class Scaled Frog!”

A Lord-class Scaled Frog did exist in this zone, but its spawn location wasn’t predetermined, so encountering it was a matter of luck. However, it could be found roaming around the central region of the forest near either mountain. If it was slain, it would only respawn after three days.

“A Level 30 Lord!?” Tang Yao’s face turned a few shades paler. Just a day ago, he thought a Level 30 Elite was far out of his reach. Yet, now, they had actually encountered a Level 30 Lord! The only Lord-class monster he ever faced was the Treant King. Even then, it was simply a Level 5 dungeon boss.

The pair moved toward the source of the sound. Eventually, after nearing an opening in the forest, an enormous crimson Scaled Frog entered their sight. Covered in giant warts and emitting a faint red aura, it dwarfed even the Elite Scaled Frogs in size.

In his past life, Scaled Frogs were notorious for their poison damage among the players levelling in this zone. Even a Level 30 Fighter with over 2000 health would eventually succumb to the poison if they didn’t drink an Intermediate Antidote quickly enough after being inflicted. The poison of a Lord-class Scaled Frog would presumably be even more potent.

Like its weaker counterparts, the Lord-class Scaled Frog was also lazy and slow in a passive state. After moving around a little, it would stay in place for quite a while.

Nie Yan activated Transcendent Insight. With his level being higher than the day before, he was now able to fully inspect them.

Scaled Frog (Lord): Level 30

Health: 50,000/50,000

What a frightening amount of health!

“Can we still deal with it the same way?” Tang Yao asked. If the Smoke Powder was still effective, regardless of whether it was an Elite or Lord, it would still be a stationary target.

“It’ll be difficult. It has a Sight of about 50. Even if we reduce that to 35 with the Smoke Powder, your cast range still won’t be enough.” Nie Yan shook his head. If Tang Yao attacked the Lord-class Scaled Frog, it would immediately aggro onto him.

“I have a necklace that increases my cast range by 10%,” Tang Yao said, pointing to the necklace on his neck.

“Hmm, still a bit short. That only increases your cast range to 33 meters.” Nie Yan shook his head again. Still, he never expected Tang Yao to be carrying such an item.

“Is there no other way?” Tang Yao asked, sounding rather disappointed. He used to believe that a one or two-meter difference

in cast range was negligible, but who could have thought that this difference would play such an important role now?

Sinking into deep thought, Nie Yan finally replied, “It’s not impossible, but it’s going to be a little difficult. We’re gonna need to find some suitable terrain to pull it off.”

“Say it, I’m willing to give it a try.”

“We’ll have to lure it near the base of a hill. You’ll be attacking it from the top of that hill. When there’s a difference in elevation between caster and target, your spells will gain an additional 10 to 50% range depending on that difference,” Nie Yan replied.

“Oh, that’s all? And here I thought we were gonna do something crazy. We’re in a mountain area right now. Finding a hill should be easy,” Tang Yao said with a relieved expression.

“You’re oversimplifying things too much. It’s not going to be that easy. If the hill isn’t high enough, you’ll only get a 10% increase in cast range. That’s 36 meters while the Elite Scaled Frog’s range of vision is 35 meters. Under that circumstance, can you guarantee you won’t accidentally get too close... and what if it suddenly moved? You only have a one-meter margin for error. Even I can’t say with full confidence that I could pull it off. In order to minimize the risk of you getting aggroed onto, we need to find a hill that will give you a cast range bonus of at least 20%.”

Tang Yao nodded after listening to Nie Yan’s explanation. He did indeed lack the skill to pull something like that off. If he got too

close, he would be discovered. If he was too far and his spells failed to reach their target, then he would be giving time for the Scaled Frog to regenerate its health. Such a small margin for error made hunting it too difficult. Best case scenario, they would eventually succeed in slaying it, but who knows how much time they would waste. Worst case scenario, they would end up dying mid-way into wearing down its health.

“You keep an eye on it for now. I’ll go look for some suitable terrain nearby,” Nie Yan said. Since they encountered a Lord-class monster, they absolutely couldn’t let it get away. Aside from the experience, it would also drop 10 gold or more in money and items.

“Alright.”

“Here, take this Intermediate Flash Powder. If you come across danger, you can use the Flash Powder to run away.”

Nie Yan activated a haste scroll and sprinted into the forest before disappearing among the trees. Even though this mountainous area had plenty of slopes, the location he was going to select couldn’t be too far away; otherwise, they ran a much higher risk of dying while luring the Lord-class Scaled Frog over there.

Sweeping through the twisting and winding mountain paths, Nie Yan found several hills, but because either their incline was too gentle or their size was too small, he directly ruled them out.

After five or six minutes of searching, he finally arrived at the

base of a rocky hill. Its incline was reasonably steep, and it was around nine meters tall. If Tang Yao stood at the very top, he would for certain gain at least an additional 30% in cast range.

「I found a suitable location. Hurry over to these coordinates: 23228.23375.285.」

「Alright, I'll be there as soon as possible,」Tang Yao answered. After arriving at the coordinates and meeting up with Nie Yan, he stared blankly at the rocky hill in front of him. “This is the place?”

“Yep.”

“How am I gonna get up there?”

Nie Yan unequipped his Crawler Ring and tossed it over to Tang Yao.

“Put this on.”

Tang Yao caught the ring and eyed it with a curious expression. After checking its properties, he emotionally exclaimed, “This ring is amazing! I can easily cross over any obstacle with it like it's nothing!”

“Start climbing. I'm gonna lure it this way. When I bring it to those trees over there, I'll lay down the Smoke Powder, and then, you can start attacking,” Nie Yan said before sprinting back to the Lord-class Scaled Frog.

After he left, Tang Yao activated the Crawler Ring's ability. Immediately, a strange attractive force emerged on the palms of his hands. As soon as he placed them on the rock wall, they firmly stuck on.

"Sweet!" He began climbing up. After reaching the top, he pulled himself up and began surveying around. At such a high elevation, he could take in much more of the surroundings.

Meanwhile, Nie Yan found the Lord-class Scaled Frog, and after getting into range, he retrieved his crossbow and fired off a round of bolts.「Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!」Even though they all firmly struck their target, due to the large level discrepancy, they were unable to deal any damage, and instead, they all showed as a miss. He wasn't like Tang Yao who had an Arcane Fairy to help him overcome the level difference and deal damage.

Even though they all missed, the Scaled Frog still got agitated by them and subsequently noticed him. It let out a deep croak before bounding toward him like an arrow released from a bow.

He activated Swift Retreat and fled for his life.

Even though the skill was suitable for fleeing while in combat, it would likely reduce the amount of aggro on the player, so it was best not to use it while pulling mobs.

However, Nie Yan had no choice in the matter. A Level 30 Lord-class monster was simply too fast. If he didn't activate it, it would

basically be impossible for him to get away.

After the Scaled Frog's leaping strike failed to hit its target, it opened its mouth and spat out a jet of scarlet sludge at him.

He quickly activated the Silk Spinner Ring's ability as a line of webbing shot from his left hand onto a nearby tree. With a hard tug, he was pulled away to safety.

The sludge flew past his previous location and landed on the trunk of a tree. Almost immediately, upon making contact with the wood, it began sizzling and emitting white smoke.

Nie Yan dashed through the forest with the Scaled Frog in hot pursuit. It would shoot jets of sludge at him non-stop, leaving him with no choice but to duck behind the cover of nearby trees.

Two minutes later, while it was still aggroed onto him, he was finally able to bring it over to the designated location.

The Scaled Frog suddenly leaped high into the air as it hurled itself at him again.

Nie Yan rolled to the side and evaded the attack. Retrieving a pouch of Intermediate Flash Powder from his bag, he then threw it at the Scaled Frog behind him.「Poof!」It exploded into a cloud of blinding light, taking away the Scaled Frog's sight. As it let out an aggrieved croak from the pain in its eyes, flailing around helplessly, he grabbed the Smoke Powder and laid it down,

whereupon a dense cloud of smoke spread outward and enveloped the area.

While the Scaled Frog was still blinded, Nie Yan took advantage of the opportunity to retreat and signalled to Tang Yao who was standing at the top of the hill.

「You can begin.」

After getting the go-ahead from Nie Yan, Tang Yao began casting his magic. The first spell he cast was Meteor and soon, waves of meteors rained down on the Scaled Frog, causing a string of damage values to rise up above its head. He immediately followed it up with his other spells. Arcane Flame Burst! Arcane Fireball! Arcane Missile! 「Bang! Bang! Bang!」 The Scaled Frog was set alight by the barrage of spells.

Chapter 145 – Explosive Levelling

Occasionally, when Ignore Level proc'd, Tang Yao's spells would deal over 100 damage, but they usually didn't exceed 10. Even then, his DPM (damage per minute) was still quite significant because he was making up for the low damage per hit with the sheer number of spells he was outputting.

The Lord-class Scaled Frog's health fell at a constant pace. Even though it wasn't by much, it still gave Nie Yan and Tang Yao hope of seeing an eventual end.

This was a Level 30 Lord!

It couldn't be compared to an Elite!

In his past life, when a player encountered a Lord-class monster in the wilderness, they would immediately notify their guild. Hundreds of members would then be mobilized to deal with it because Lords were often the sparks for many major guild battles. Lords would usually drop Dark Gold-grade equipment upon death. However, if the player was lucky, then Legendary-grade equipment fragments might drop. Even with terrible luck, they were guaranteed equipment of at least Gold-grade which could be sold for quite a bit of money.

Now, under Tang Yao's intense barrage of spells, the Lord-class Scaled Frog's health was being gradually chipped away, 99.9%, 99.8%...

Even though the battle was progressing at a snail's pace, Tang Yao and Nie Yan were nonetheless in high spirits.

If they successfully killed it, then everything would be divided between just the two of them. Just how much experience would they receive?

For the time being, Nie Yan wouldn't know the answer to that question. Even back in his prime, he had never killed an equal level Lord-class monster with just two people, let alone one that was of a much higher level than him. Now, however, he was accomplishing feats that he would have never dared to attempt or imagine were possible in his past life!

"Nie Yan, do you know how much experience a Lord-class monster will give? This guy is so tanky. He has more than ten times the health of an Elite," Tang Yao asked, his mind trembling from excitement. He just couldn't imagine it.

Would he level up once, twice, or maybe even more?

"You'll probably go up two or three levels. Focus on attacking. If you slow down, its health will start recovering," Nie Yan answered. Thankfully, Tang Yao's magic power was high enough. Adding the Ignore Level Difference procs, his damage was quite impressive. If it were any other Mage, they probably wouldn't even leave so much as a scratch on this Lord-class Scaled Frog's health.

"Don't worry. My damage output won't stop."

Compared to before, Tang Yao had shown remarkable improvement. As for a relatively mindless task like this, he absolutely wouldn't make any mistakes.

I should prepare some Magic Power Potions for next time, Nie Yan thought. If Tang Yao's Magic Power was increased, hunting monsters would go by much faster. However, they were relatively expensive. A batch of potions with Magic Power +20 would sell for at least 3 silver per bottle. If their effects were more potent, they would fetch an even higher price. For him, though, money was not the issue. It was the fact that, at this point in time, they were rare and thus difficult to obtain from the marketplace.

While contemplating, he continued to carefully monitor the movements of the Lord-class Scaled Frog. Thanks to Tang Yao casting spells from higher ground, it was currently still in a state of confusion with no idea of where the attacks were coming from, leaving it with no choice but to blindly move around in the hopes of spotting its aggressor. He had a higher attack range than Tang Yao with the crossbow, being able to shoot from almost 40 meters away, so if it wandered out of Tang Yao's cast range or approached too closely to Tang Yao's position, he would be able to immediately fire at it from a safe distance and lure it back. His crossbow bolts were shot from level ground, so the Scaled Frog would always move toward whichever direction he fired from. However, since there were no follow-up shots, it would eventually stop investigating after moving several steps. As a result, the Scaled Frog was never able to wander off too far or too close.

While they were still chipping away at the boss' health, Nie Yan suddenly received a call from Hao Cheng.

「Hey, how are things over at your side? How long till Tang Yao reaches Level 15?」Hao Cheng asked.

「If I were to give an estimate, probably in around three hours.」

「Really, it's still going to take that long? Well, I guess that makes sense. At your levels, you guys probably need a lot of experience to level up. Anyway, we've finished establishing the guild. We're just recruiting by the auction house right now. We've already brought in over a thousand members, and there's still a steady stream of players coming in, but the treasury is still completely empty, so some of them are already starting to worry. I've assured them that it's going to be filled up soon, so they're all waiting to see... but if nothing changes, I'm worried a lot of them are going to start leaving over the next few days,」Hao Cheng explained. The first batch of members were extremely important. If they felt the guild was worth being a part of, they would recruit their friends to join them. After all, even though having strong elites was an important factor, the foundation of a guild was laid through the efforts of its ordinary members.

Nie Yan thought for a moment before replying,「You can tell them they'll be seeing more benefits soon, and right now, they can go to the Starry Night Potion Shop to receive a discount. Members with up to 100 merit points will get 5% off purchases with a 30 copper limit. Members with up to 500 merit points will get 5% off purchases with a 1 silver and 50 copper limit...」In this fashion, he would be driving business to his potion shop, and by limiting how much they could purchase with the discount, he would prevent other guilds from buying large quantities of goods through proxy, but above all, he would be incentivising the members of his guild to increase their contribution.

「You know the owner there?」

「That's the explanation you can give to our guild members.」

「Alright, this should convince a lot of people to stay,」Hao Cheng excitedly said. Getting a discount from the Starry Night Potion Shop was an incredible boon for their guild. Right now, it was the most influential potion shop in all of Calore. With over a hundred Junior Alchemists and several hundred Apprentice Alchemists working there, it produced more than 60% of the concoctions circulating in Calore's market. This building that towered over its surroundings had in a short time become a holy place for Alchemy. Any Alchemist with half a brain would apply there, and some contracted Alchemists would leave their guilds to join through a recommendation from a friend. Hao Cheng had never once heard of the Starry Night Potion Shop offering a 5% discount to any guild. This move would undoubtedly inform all their members that they had the Starry Night Potion Shop supporting them from behind-the-scenes. With such a powerful backer, who would dare doubt their guild's ability to provide?

Hao Cheng quickly notified the others of the good news.

Back in the forest, Nie Yan and Tang Yao were still busy wearing down the Lord-class Scaled Frog.

Elsewhere, Heaven Breaker had just returned to Victorious Return guild headquarters after finishing a dungeon run.

“How’s the progress? Did you find out more about Young Sparrow Hawk?” Heaven Breaker asked Tangerine who stood beside him.

“Yes, he’s a member of a pretty mediocre team. They haven’t even run Black Flame Forest yet. He was last spotted in that team two days ago. Recently, he’s been nowhere to be found, so we still don’t know how he’s been levelling so quickly.”

“I see, then he’s probably just an ordinary player who got lucky. When you find him, force him to reveal where he’s been levelling.”

“We also received another interesting piece of information from a player named [Chen Bo](#). Apparently, Nirvana Flame and Young Sparrow Hawk are close friends.”

Just in case you forgot him, Chen Bo is first mentioned in Chapter 17. He makes his first real appearance in Chapter 42.

“Nirvana Flame...” Heaven Breaker’s expression turned icy upon hearing this name.

“According to the reports, Young Sparrow Hawk had also come into conflict with members of Radiant Sacred Flame in the past.”

“Eh? What was the outcome?”

“Radiant Sacred Flame had several dozen members blockading Young Sparrow Hawk and his party members inside Levin Hills. All of his party members were killed, but he somehow managed to

escape. Later on, Nirvana Flame emerged and rescued him. In the process, he killed six or seven of their members, including Dian Cang who lost his Fire Chaser Set,” Tangerine replied with trepidation. It seemed her party wasn’t the first to fall by his hand.

“All by himself?” Heaven Breaker asked with a look of surprise. His guild had some degree of friendship with Radiant Sacred Flame, so he had learned of this incident before. However, back then, he had only heard that Dian Cang died to a player and lost all his gear. Who would have thought that that player was actually Nirvana Flame?

“Yes, all by himself. At that time, Radiant Sacred Flame had no way of dealing with him, so they had no choice but to call off their manhunt.”

Heaven Breaker sank into deep thought. If this was all truly related to Nirvana Flame, then he would need to pay serious attention to this Young Sparrow Hawk from now on.

As Tangerine was about to speak, she suddenly hesitated.

“If you have something to say, just say it.” Heaven Breaker shot her a glance.

“I think it’s best if we withdraw the internal bounty on Nirvana Flame. If our guild members encounter him, I’m afraid they won’t be his match.”

Tangerine felt frightened when Heaven Breaker's expression darkened in response to her words.

“Erm... Also, I believe Young Sparrow Hawk is with Nirvana Flame right now.”

“Tell me, do you think their levels are about the same?” Heaven Breaker asked. After hearing her words, he knew exactly what she was about to say.

“Y-yes. I think the only reason he hasn't shown up on the leaderboards is because he's hiding himself. When we met him last time, he was already Level 11.”

Heaven Breaker fell silent for a short period of time, then said, “Withdraw the internal bounty on Nirvana Flame. After that, go find me that player named Chen Bo.”

“Find him? For what reason?”

“You don't need to know.”

“Understood.”

At a muddy meadow deep within a remote forest, Nie Yan and Tang Yao were arduously working on the same repetitive task. The Lord-class Scaled Frog was being worn down extremely slowly. It was so slow they felt like an eternity was passing them by as they waited for its health bar to fall by the tiniest of a fraction.

Lord-class monsters were formidable to a degree that many players couldn't imagine. With the normal method of hunting mobs, even if there were over several thousand Level 10 players, they still wouldn't necessarily be able to kill a Level 30 Lord.

Almost ten hours later, Nie Yan had exhausted pouch after pouch of Smoke Powder and the arm Tang Yao used to raise his staff felt like it was about to fall off, but the end was almost in sight. The Lord-class Scaled Frog had only a sliver of health remaining.

「Oh my god... we've been at this for almost ten hours now and this bastard still hasn't croaked. If he doesn't die soon, then I will!」 Tang Yao wore a bitter expression on his face.

「It still has 2% left. Come on, we're at the final stretch.」

When the Scaled Frog's health had fallen below 20%, it had entered a berserk state and unleashed several large-scale area of effect spells. However, aside from the trees, none of them hit their intended targets. In fact, since the start of the battle, it had never even been able to spot where the enemy was.

Hearing Nie Yan's words, Tang Yao accelerated his pace, his heart beating rapidly and his mind focused on only one thing. Let me level... Let me level... Let me level...

With a final Arcane Flame Burst, the Lord-class Scaled Frog finally lost its last bit of health. It let out a mournful croak before collapsing, dying the ground in crimson.

A gorgeous radiance enveloped Nie Yan and Tang Yao.

「Ding dong!」

「Ding dong!」

Nie Yan heard two jingling sounds, signifying that he had levelled up twice. The Lord-class Scaled Frog gave him enough experience to go from Level 14 directly to level 16. As for Tang Yao, since he had contributed the most, he received even more experience and directly rose to Level 17.

Seeing how much he had levelled, Tang Yao was struck in a daze.

Thinking he had misread his own level, he asked,「Nie Yan... am I really Level 17?」

「Yep.」 Nie Yan faintly smiled before walking over to the Scaled Frog's corpse. A Level 30 Lord-class monster, who knew what sort of items it would drop. After poking around the corpse, he found a ring, some leather armour, a recipe, and 2 gold.

Chapter 146 – Empire

The fruits of their labour could be regarded as sizeable. To see two pieces of equipment drop was quite rare, but then again, the game system would always reward players generously for slaying monsters above their level, especially when felling a higher class monster such as a Lord.

Nie Yan examined the properties of the ring.

Scarlet Poison Ring: (Dark Gold)

Requirements: 120 Strength, 160 Dexterity

Properties: Attack 53–57, +20% Poison Damage, Poison Resistance +20, Ignore Level +1

Weight: 0.1 lb

Restrictions: Can be equipped by all factions.

It was crafted from a ferrous metal and adorned with a large ruby that emitted a bewitching tint. A ring that was able to raise attack was truly a rare sight indeed. Moreover, it had the Ignore Level property and increased poison damage and poison resistance as well. Such an accessory was an extremely amazing existence even for a Level 30 player. Then again, any piece of equipment dropped from a Lord-class would never be lacking in any respect, to say nothing of this ring that was Dark Gold-grade. Nie Yan felt it quite a pity that accessories could not be upgraded with Fortune Gems; otherwise, he would have definitely raised it by at least five stages.

By having such a ring in his hands at this stage of the game, he was practically defying the heavens.

However, with such high stat requirements, it wasn't something an average player under Level 30 could hope to equip.

Nie Yan glanced at his character information. After recently levelling up to Level 16, he gained an additional 2 Dexterity from the [Chapter of Freedom](#), so his Dexterity was currently 110. Thanks to the [Chapter of Courage](#), he also received an additional 2 stat points on top of the 5 that were given every 5 levels. Allocating everything into Dexterity, he brought his to a total of 117. However, he was still short by 43 points. When I get back to Calore, I should go and find a few skill books to raise it some more, he thought.

Description: The sixth chapter from the first volume of the Book of Order, an incomplete piece of the legendary book.

Properties: Receive 2 Dexterity and 1 Skill Point every 5 levels.
Stealth +15, Cloak +15, Reflex +15, Strength +30

Disappear: Allows the player to stealth in the middle of combat.
Has a certain probability of avoiding the enemy's attack

Passive: Stealth +20

Sacrificial Gambit: Sacrifice 30% of current health for a 50%, 20%, or 10% chance to deal 200%, 300%, or 500% of the amount sacrificed as damage respectively

Cooldown: 2 days (1/2)

Restrictions: Can only be used by a member of the Righteous Guardian of Order

Note: Item effects are applied immediately upon entering the player's bag

Description: The third chapter of the first volume of the Book of Order, an incomplete piece of the legendary book. Whoever shall possess this chapter will receive the inheritance of the God of Light. Your mission is to spread the glory of light.

Properties: Receive 2 Stat Points and 1 Skill Point every 5 levels. Focus +15, Willpower +15, Resilience +16, Jump +15, Reflex +15, Speed +16

Transcendent Insight: Gain the ability to see through your enemies. Allows you to view enemy character information. Also grants the ability to appraise items.

Passive: Awareness +10

Adjudicator of God: When activated, become immune to all magic, gain 500 health, and summon an advanced life-saving shield that absorbs sixty percent of all incoming damage for five minutes. (this skill cannot be used in instances)

Cooldown: 10 days (1/10)

Restriction: Can only be bound by a member of the Righteous faction who protects the light

Note: Item effects are applied immediately upon entering the player's inventory

If he could equip the ring, then his attack would reach an even more frightening level.

Finished examining the ring, he then shifted his attention to the leather armour.

Scarlet Scaled Leather Armour (Dark Gold)

Requirements: Level 30

Properties: Defense 268–272, Physical Damage –10%, Resilience +32, Defense Level +1

Weight: 27 lb

Restrictions: Thief; can be equipped by all factions.

Its properties were pretty good, but with it requiring the player to be Level 30, it was useless to him for now. And just like the ring, it was also an item meant for a Thief. Tang Yao was out of luck.

Finally, he took a look at the recipe that dropped. It was an Intermediate Mana Potion Recipe which could only be learned by an Intermediate Alchemist.

“What a stroke of luck!” Nie Yan fully understood the worth of an Intermediate Mana Potion Recipe. It was several hundred times rarer than an Intermediate Health Potion Recipe. Due to how difficult it was to obtain, its was incredibly valuable.

For Mages, their mana bar was like a second health bar, so if it ran out, their lives would be in danger. This was why having good mana potions was vital. In dungeons, it would allow them to continue dealing damage at a steady pace. Even more so, if an unexpected situation occurred, it could indirectly allow them to save a teammate from death!

In his past life, the manufacturing costs of an Intermediate Mana Potion was about 1 silver, while it was usually sold for around 60 silver. If there were plenty of materials and ingredients, an

Intermediate Alchemist would be able to produce up to fifteen bottles every hour. By rough estimations, he could easily imagine how much profit this would bring in.

The primary ingredient for concocting Intermediate Mana Potions, Windletter Herb, could be found in any Level 1–50 map, and they had already started appearing in the marketplace. However, medicinal plants such as the Windletter Herb grew sporadically. The lower the level of the map, the less likely they were to appear. Often times, the same type of plant could be an ingredient in numerous recipes, so despite not being needed immediately, many large guilds would frequently purchase and stockpile them. Hence, even if a player camped out at the auction house all day, they still wouldn't be able to acquire much.

Like many other guilds, since Holy Empire wasn't able to match the behemoth that was the Starry Night Potion Shop, many of their guild Alchemists ended up leaving their ranks, and their consumption of medicinal plants fell accordingly. However, thanks to the deal Nie Yan had negotiated with them, they were able to sell their surplus to his shop. As a result, he was able to acquire vast quantities of medicinal plants every day, which was why he wasn't too worried about lacking ingredients. Besides, it would soon have Asskickers United as a supplier as well.

It was a bit unfortunate that Intermediate Mana Potions were currently still out of reach to most players. For the time being, only a few of the more wealthy players would be able to afford them. Even then, they would likely only be used in case of emergency.

Climbing down from the rocky hill, Tang Yao walked over to Nie Yan and handed back the Crawler Ring before asking, “What did it drop?”

“Only Thief equipment.”

“... Is my luck really that bad today?” Tang Yao was left almost speechless. Nonetheless, the type of equipment a field boss would drop was always random, so he could only reluctantly accept this outcome.

“You’ve already outlevelled most of your gear. I have a few pieces of Level 10 Mage equipment back at my storage that you can use for the time being. Then, when I have the time, we’ll get you a set of Level 20 gear,” Nie Yan said. If they continued at their current pace, Tang Yao would reach Level 20 in no time.

After killing the Lord-class Scaled Frog, Nie Yan’s PKer status had completely disappeared. In the end, he still wasn’t able to find a Killer’s Demonic Medallion. He could only sigh in regret and wait for the next time to try again.

“Wow, red names really do go away pretty quickly when killing Scaled Frogs.”

“Yeah, it’s one of the fastest ways,” Nie Yan answered reluctantly. He didn’t actually want his red name to disappear just yet. Perhaps, if he had been red for just a little while longer, a medallion would have dropped.

Never expecting it to take them ten hours just to kill a single Lord-class monster, Nie Yan and Tang Yao hastily made their way over to the two remaining Elites. Considering that Elites only spawned once a day, they definitely couldn't let them go to waste. After all, though not as much as a Lord, they still gave generous amounts of experience.

At this moment, the pair were completely unaware of just how much of an uproar they created among the players when Tang Yao suddenly leaped to Level 17. With Heaven Breaker being cleanly knocked out of first place, the forums were booming with discussion.

Guo Huai, Hao Cheng, Zhao Li, and a few other friends all received the news; after which Tang Yao's chat was being overrun with messages.

「Young Sparrow Hawk, how did you suddenly level up so quickly? Too frightening!」

「Level 17 already... Heavens, you're too amazing.」

「Tang Yao! You're so awesome. You actually beat Heaven Breaker! We even thought you guys weren't going to make it today. Who could've known you were going to jump so many levels at once!」

「Quick, go look at the forums!」Guo Huai said.

Both Nie Yan and Tang Yao opened the forums. The Viridian Empire board was almost exploding with activity as the title of every post was highlighted in bright red.

「A player suddenly went up 3 levels at once. Is this a bug?」

The official response from a staff member on the Conviction website was:「We've already done an investigation and verified that the player in question has levelled up in a legitimate way. If a player kills a monster above their level, the system will reward them with additional experience. We've also verified that this system is working as intended.」

The Conviction staff were quite responsive. They would always answer within five minutes of a player raising an issue.

Below the official response, the commenters were all expressing their amazement and shock. Tang Yao's accomplishment was inconceivable. To level up three times at once... just how much experience was required? Just what kind of monster would you have to kill to suddenly jump from Level 14 to level 17?

...

「Viridian Empire's Most Godly Player! Levelled 3x at Once to Destroy Heaven Breaker!」

「A Legend is Born. The God-like Player, Young Sparrow Hawk.」

「A Surprise For All Players. God Sparrow Hawk Has Beaten Heaven Breaker!」

The rest of the threads were all along the same lines. In a short while, Tang Yao was pushed to the forefront and became an instant celebrity!

...

I wonder what their reactions would be if they knew this godly player was still wearing the Fire Chaser Set... I bet they wouldn't know whether to laugh or cry! Tang Yao sighed as he thought in a self-mocking manner. Even though the Fire Chaser Set was by no means bad, it was completely unsuitable for someone of his level.

「My heavens! Amazing... this is too unbelievable.」Guo Huai gasped.

「Huh? What's up? Did something happen?」

「Just a moment ago, we started receiving more players applying to our guild. And instead of slowing down, it's actually still going up! There are so many people applying that I can't even go through all of them. The guild headquarters is packed. There's already several thousand of us in there. Any more, and it's going to collapse!」Guo Huai informed excitedly. Never in his wildest dreams did he expect for such a grand occasion to occur.

「How many members do we have right now?」

「More than five thousand, and that number is still rapidly increasing. Right now, even though we're only accepting players over Level 9, we're still getting plenty of people applying. It's going to take me at least a day to go through all of them, and I think four or five days to get all the guild affairs in order. At the rate we're going, I think, by tomorrow, we'll break through to ten thousand members at the very least.」

Listening to Guo Huai's description, Nie Yan and Tang Yao could roughly imagine how the situation was going over at their guild headquarters.

The guild headquarters was an instanced area given by the system. Starting out, it would be quite modest with only a small courtyard and a very narrow building. Both could be expanded by spending money on upgrading the headquarters' tier. The building was designed to fit around two hundred people, while the courtyard could hold about eight hundred. Yet, right now, over several thousand players were crowded in there with Guo Huai.

「We're a success!」 Tang Yao exclaimed.

Nie Yan shook his head before saying in a cool-headed manner, 「It's still too early to be celebrating. Right now, we don't know how many players from other guilds have infiltrated our ranks. We still need to gradually sift through them, carefully monitor them, and do some deeper background checks. If we find these moles, we immediately kick them. As for the other players, it's still hard to say how cohesive we'll be as a guild and how effective we'll be in guild battles. We're at the most critical juncture in our

development. We need to take things slowly, step by step. If we go too fast, we might end up tripping and falling over without any way to get back up.」

Tang Yao and Guo Huai fell silent. They had let their excitement get the better of them. Thankfully, Nie Yan's words were sobering.

「Find a few more people we can trust to help manage the guild and have them carefully comb through the members. We'll divide our ranks accordingly. The higher level the player and the more contribution they have, the more access we'll give to some of our resources. I'll fill up the treasury as soon as I get back,」Nie Yan continued.

「Yeah, you're right. We got a bit too excited,」Guo Huai said. It seemed Nie Yan had grown much wiser than them.

「You guys aren't in the wrong. Today's occasion is still worth celebrating over. After all, we've finally taken our first step. We might not be comparable to those famous guilds now, but given time, as long as we set about our tasks diligently and gain a strong foothold, we'll still have a chance of expanding much more in the near future.」

「If our members grow over ten thousand, our treasury might not be enough,」Guo Huai said anxiously.

「Don't fret, I have a method,」Nie Yan replied. For the sake of developing his guild, he would turn to the place that he had always relied on to earn money, the auction house. Last time, after

gathering a great deal of equipment with Petrify Resistance and Anti-Petrify Potions, he had sold them for a decent profit. In a few days, a Level 10 dungeon called Blazing Ravine would open. It was important because that was where he would be focusing his attention on next. In preparation for its opening, he would start gathering equipment with Fire Resistance, potions, and so on. There were also items such as Basic Flash Powder, Sheep Transformation Scrolls, and Web Scrolls from Trembling Milo's Shop to think about. Right now, most players were under Level 10, so the market for them was at its peak. Players were finally starting to have some more money in their pockets, so they could actually afford to start buying more expensive things, which meant the timing was ripe for him to start flooding the marketplace with these items!

If the guild was to expand, then the treasury would have to keep up. Not only that, but it had to be better than anyone else's!

Nie Yan wasn't simply establishing a guild; no, he was setting the foundation for an empire!

Chapter 147 – Establishing the Guild Treasury

Nie Yan glanced over his masteries, Intermediate Marksman, Beginner Dual Wielding, Beginner Adept Hands, Beginner Dagger, and Beginner Cloaking. With 3 mastery points to allocate, he raised both Dual Wielding and Adept Hands to Intermediate and put his final point into Beginner Cloaking which increased his Cloak stat even further.

While equipped with two daggers, Intermediate Dual Wielding would now increase his attack by 13 points. Its effects were quite significant.

His damage was growing increasingly powerful. If he was able to equip the Scarlet Poison Ring, then even a tanky Fighter would be easily cut down by his blade.

Accessories and Legendary equipment usually had stat requirements. So long as they were fulfilled, the player would be able to immediately equip them regardless of their level. On the other hand, regular equipment had strict level requirements. Hence, obtaining a defense or attack that vastly exceeded the norm was very difficult. However, though incredibly rare, rings that increased attack or necklaces that increased defense did exist. In fact, they could even be found in the auction house. It was just that on the rare occasion they appeared, they were often excessively expensive.

Nie Yan had never stopped thinking about how he was going to get enough Dexterity to equip the ring. After all, 160 Dexterity

wasn't an easy hurdle to overcome. Thief skill books that increased Dexterity, for instance, were scarce in the marketplace because players would generally set aside these types of skill books for their acquaintances or friends. Very rarely would they ever be put up for sale. When such a skill book did appear, however, entire auction houses would go into uproar as players entered bidding frenzies to snatch it for themselves. The demand for them was simply too high. Just like how Warriors sought skill books that increased Strength or how Mages sought skill books that increased Intelligence, skill books that increased Dexterity were highly coveted by Thieves. This was why being able to obtain one was simply a matter of luck.

Although Sleepy Fox had gladly agreed to finding him a few skill books in the past, they were Thief skill books that increased Strength. If he had asked for ones that increased Dexterity instead, then he would have put Sleepy Fox in an awkward position. With so many Thieves in Holy Empire, which one didn't want more Dexterity? For what reason should they be given to an outsider like Nie Yan? Even if the guild leader himself personally agreed, the Thieves in his guild definitely wouldn't.

As for Dexterity Gems, there was no longer any space because he had already socketed all of his gear with Strength Gems.

For now, 160 Dexterity was too difficult of a barrier to cross. Were it not for him gaining more stat points than other players every level and wearing Sulgata's Boots that gave him 30 Dexterity, his Dexterity would have had a hard time even breaking through 100. If he really couldn't find the skill books, then he would simply have to wait until he was higher levelled.

“We should head back,” Nie Yan said. With their guild rapidly expanding by the second, they had plenty of business to attend to.

“Alright.” Tang Yao nodded. He also wanted to take a look at what was going on back at their guild headquarters.

After channeling their Return Scrolls, Tang Yao and Nie Yan were enshrouded by a bright radiance before being teleported back to Calore.

“Let’s check out our headquarters first. Then, I’ll set up the guild treasury,” Nie Yan suggested.

“Sure.”

The pair began walking over to their guild headquarters which was located in the southeast side of Calore. It was established there by the system. When creating a guild, the player couldn’t choose the location of their guild’s headquarters as they were set up in fixed locations. For example, Holy Empire’s was in the south side of Calore and Victorious Return’s was located in the north. They were usually placed far away from one another. Furthermore, several NPC guards were often stationed at their entrances to keep the peace and prevent conflicts from occurring.

To prevent themselves from being recognized, Nie Yan and Tang Yao set their character profiles to private.

Before even nearing the entrance, they saw a bustling crowd of

people trying to force themselves through the gates to no avail. Players of all classes were gathering from everywhere.

“Looks like we won’t be able to get in,” Tang Yao noted with a wry smile. He never thought the entrance to their guild headquarters would be packed with so many people. Who knows how long it would take for such a lively spectacle to calm down?

“If we can’t squeeze in, then forget it. I’ll be making a trip to the auction house to start setting up the treasury.”

“Ah, alright. Yu Lan (Blue Feather) and the others sent me a message. They want to head to a Level 10 zone to hunt monsters and then give Black Flame Forest a try. I’ll go check it out. Plus, I can add them to the guild while I’m there,” Tang Yao said. Yu Lan and her team could be regarded as decent. Even though they couldn’t become the main team, as long as they were developed, they were guaranteed to be among the front ranks in the guild.

“After I finish up my business, I’ll meet up with you guys and we can run Black Flame Forest together,” Nie Yan said after giving it some thought. Black Flame Forest was still a difficult dungeon to a certain extent, especially for inexperienced players. But with him leading the team, he would at least save them a couple of attempts.

“I couldn’t ask for more! When will you be done?”

“It won’t take too long, probably an hour tops.”

“Alright, I’ll go farming with them first then. Hopefully, I can find some Level 10 equipment during that time.”

Separating from Tang Yao, Nie Yan’s first stop was at the Starry Night Potion Shop where he withdrew 30 gold from the till. While there, he left the Intermediate Mana Potion Recipe as well as the other recipes that they found while hunting Scaled Frogs in the hands of Bird. After which he made his way to Trembling Milo’s Shop and bought 100 Basic Flash Powders, 50 Sheep Transformation Scrolls, and 50 Web Scrolls. With his preparations done, he finally arrived at the auction house where he would enact his plan. Every 20–30-second interval, he began listing 2 Basic Flash Powders, 1 Sheep Transformation Scroll, and 1 Web Scroll for auction.

At the same time, he opened the window for the equipment section and began browsing the list of items up for sale that reached in the excess of tens of thousands. After filtering them to the quality he desired, he started purchasing equipment en masse. If the piece of equipment was at a suitable price, he would purchase it right away. If it was too expensive, he would skip over to the next item. His bag gradually began filling up with piece after piece of equipment. Aside from the equipment for the treasury, he also snagged any item with Fire-Resistance and stored it inside his bag.

And so, as if it were running water, 30 gold went straight from his pockets down the drain. 10 of that was spent on Fire Resistance equipment while the remaining 20 was spent on 200 or so pieces of Silver-grade equipment. Paying 10 silver each on average for Silver-grade equipment was a little on the expensive side, but their properties made them worth the expense. With regard to today’s

playerbase, they were definitely at a quality an ordinary player would drool over.

Finished buying what he needed, Nie Yan opened the warehouse manager and began establishing the guild treasury and its rules. All members would be able to deposit medicinal plants, equipment, and money into the treasury. According to the quality of the equipment or the amount of money donated, they would receive 1–2 merit points. After accumulating enough contribution, they would be able to withdraw equipment from the treasury. For example, a piece of Silver-grade Thief equipment with Strength +7 and Dexterity +8 required 200 merit points, and returning it would earn them back 120 merit points. The system worked in a sort of similar way to a bank except a guild treasury was designed to constantly grow, allowing the guild to prosper even more over time.

Of course, depositing items and money into the treasury wasn't the only way to earn merit points. Another way to earn them was by doing dungeon runs with the guild. When splitting the spoils of battle, players who didn't obtain a piece of equipment would be rewarded with some merit points. Completing quests assigned by the guild was also another option.

In this fashion, as a player contributed more to their guild, they would be able to withdraw progressively better items from the treasury.

Piggybacking off the knowledge of those major guilds in his past life, Nie Yan wrote down each rule in detail. After running through them once more, carefully scanning line by line, to ensure no

exploitable loopholes existed, he finally declared the guild treasury open.

He had sole ownership of the treasury. Hao Cheng, Zhao Li, and Guo Huai were given 1000–2000 merit points each while Tang Yao was given a little more at 3000 to freely distribute as they pleased. Of course, if they felt the amount still wasn't enough, they could simply ask him for more.

The guild treasury could be accessed by members at their personal storage as well as at the guild headquarters.

With everything settled, Nie Yan sent a message to Guo Huai and the others.

「Hey, guys. I just finished setting up the treasury. Go take a look.」

Back at the guild headquarters, Hao Cheng, Guo Huai, and Zhao Li were all heavily preoccupied with handling all of the applications to join the guild. Despite a deluge of members flooding their ranks, the crowd gathering outside their headquarters didn't diminish at all. In fact, it was growing ever larger.

After Guo Huai and the others received Nie Yan's message, they opened the guild treasury with eager haste. What awaited them was 200 pieces of Silver-grade equipment arranged neatly inside, truly a magnificent sight to behold. There were even 30 pieces of Level 10 Gold-grade equipment. Lastly, they saw some Silver and Gold-grade equipment that required the player to be Level 20 or 30

to equip. Their cost was staggering, requiring 3000 merit points or more to acquire.

Nie Yan had carefully considered the matter. Even though adding Level 30 equipment into the treasury might seem a little ostentatious, it was no longer a secret that Tang Yao had levelled up through killing monsters above his level. By having them in there, not only was it guaranteed to shake the minds of the ordinary members, it would also thoroughly convince them of the guild's strength.

Hao Cheng stood there in a daze, staring blankly at the treasury. The neatly sorted display of equipment truly gave him quite a shock. Not a single one wasn't good in one way or the other. When his gaze eventually fell on the Level 30 equipment at the back, he saw an even clearer sign of their strength. Just what did having such equipment right now signify? It would undoubtedly let their members know, as long as they brought their contribution up, while others were still worrying about finding equipment at Level 30, they would be able to wear Silver and Gold-grade equipment!

“Everybody, please calm down!” Guo Huai shouted at the players, who were lining up to be added, at the back.

As soon as they and the bustling crowd of players squeezing in from the entrance heard Guo Huai, all of them quieted down in order to hear what he had to say.

“You’ve all already seen for yourselves. The guild leader of Asskickers United, Young Sparrow Hawk, is currently the number one player on the leaderboards. Thanks to that, we’ve received

everyone's enthusiastic support, and for that, we are deeply honoured. I know you've all seen many guilds rise and fall. It's a fairly regular occurrence... but I want to assure you that our guild will definitely prosper long into the future! Naturally, various benefits will follow accordingly. I wish for more players to join our ranks, to expand ourselves into a major power that's equal in footing with the likes of Victorious Return, Radiant Sacred Flame, and Holy Empire! We've already let all our players know, as members of Asskickers United, they may enjoy a 5% discount at the Starry Night Potion Shop. Well, now, I am happy to announce that we've finally established our guild treasury! Everyone, please feel free to take a look. I hope that many more of you strong players will join us in our endeavor!" Guo Huai shouted at the top of his lungs.

"The treasury is set up already...? Wow, that's pretty fast!"

"So much Silver-grade equipment! They even got a few for Level 30s!"

The numerous new recruits went into an uproar. The Silver and Gold-grade equipment glistening ever so brightly caused their mouths to water and their eyes to fill with greed.

"Big Bro Watchful Snail, can you please tell us what kind of relationship our guild has with the Starry Night Potion Shop?"

"Yeah, please tell us!"

"Sorry, everyone. That'll have to remain a secret for a little while

longer,” Guo Huai replied in a calm and collected manner. He was finally starting to have the bearing of a superior.

Chapter 148 – Ambush

The news of the treasury opening soon spread like wildfire, sparking another massive surge in new players wishing to join their ranks.

Guo Huai, Zhao Li, and Hao Cheng's hands were practically going limp with exhaustion from accepting all the join requests. Even though they were letting anyone who fit the level requirements in, they would have to carefully comb through every one of them in the coming several days to ensure that the entire guild could function smoothly. As such, they still had plenty of work ahead of them.

With Guo Huai and the others at the helm, Nie Yan felt he could safely leave guild management to them. As for himself, it would be fine for him to simply focus on levelling and improving his gear.

「Nirvana Flame, where are you right now? We're already by the entrance of Black Flame Forest. Yao Zi (Young Sparrow Hawk) is here too. Do you remember [Moon Child](#) from last time? She came as well. Everyone's just waiting for you now,」Yao Yao sent Nie Yan a message. They were all eagerly looking forward to running a dungeon with him.

Moon Child is one of Yao Yao's classmates in real life. She makes her first appearance in Chapter 102.

“Hmmm, there's no harm in running it with them. Besides, it'll only take an hour at most, and if we do it on Specialist, I can get my hands on some treasure...” Nie Yan muttered to himself.

「Alright, I'll be there in a moment.」

Nie Yan walked over to the transfer point and teleported over to Tanbeto Town.

Located somewhere east of Calore, the town had an ancientness to it with many of its features dating back to the Era of Shared Governance. The carvings on the town wall, after centuries of corrosion from wind and rain, could barely be made out. With dilapidated building and age-old streets that had somehow persisted through the ages, it left players with a feeling that could only be experienced from visiting a historical site.

The clothing of the NPC guards here was also quite strange. They had a somewhat ancient air about them too. Wearing short, robed armour and horned metal helmets, they resembled the barbarian warriors of old.

As he walked along the main street, he came across a group of around seventeen players walking in his direction. Their gear was excellent. He recognized many pieces that could only be found from running Sosil Valley. He was flabbergasted. If they were already capable of clearing Sosil Valley, why would they be hanging around here?

Some were tall and sturdy while others were slightly built. There were players of every class. However, one trait they all shared was the same air of domineering arrogance that caused Nie Yan to furrow his brows. Just who were these people?

“Skinny Dog, your blade needs to be a bit faster when PKing,” a tall Elementalist in an ash gray robe said with a cold smile. His eyes fell on Nie Yan, but it was only a quick glance.

“No need to worry. At the very least, my dagger is much faster than your staff,” a short, scrawny Thief replied as he skillfully played with the dagger in his hand. His face was covered with a black cloak that made it hard to make out his appearance.

The group of players were chatting and laughing loudly as they walked. When they approached Nie Yan, they sized him up with a quick glance before brushing past.

This group of players seemed a little familiar, but their names were all hidden. His memory wasn't so great that he could remember every player that had crossed paths with him in his past. If they didn't possess any particularly notable features, he wouldn't be able to recall their name.

He probably didn't have many interactions with these players in his past life.

Nie Yan walked out of the town gates. Black Flame Forest was located north of Tanbeto Town. That place was a scorched ruin. Everything there was burned as black as soot. Legends told that during the Dark Era, the Black Flame Phoenix, Soros, fell over this place and transformed it into a region of endless black fire that would never be extinguished. After entering the dungeon, players would even be able to spot the massive skeleton belonging to Soros

located inside the forest.

After burning non-stop for centuries, the place attracted a great number of fire elementals who took up residence there, becoming an important dungeon for players in the early levels.

Surrounding Black Flame Forest was a vast, rocky wasteland where very few plants could grow. The monsters that inhabited this zone were Level 3 Kobolds. Just outside the entrance of Black Flame Forest was a vacant piece of land that served as a gathering spot for players to form teams. However, today the place seemed a little desolate. Almost no players were there. It was a little strange.

However, Yu Lan (Blue Feather) and the others were there waiting by the entrance.

Nie Yan walked up to them and greeted them with a smile. “Long time no see, everyone.”

“You’re finally here. We’ve been waiting forever. You sure are busy these days, huh?” Yao Yao’s pursed lips relaxed into a smile. It so beautiful that it would always brighten the mood wherever she went.

“Boss Nirvana Flame, everyone’s been waiting a long time for you to arrive.”

Nie Yan faintly smiled as he acknowledged them with a slight nod. He also greeted Moon Child, who was standing by Yao Yao’s

side.

Having not seen them for several days, their gear was much improved and their levels were also a lot higher, averaging around Level 10. The sole reason they had waited for so long was because they hoped Nie Yan would lead them through this dungeon on Specialist.

“We’ll be troubling you to guide us again,” Yu Lan stared at Nie Yan and said in a somewhat troubled tone. She felt guilty for inconveniencing him again.

“You guys are already part of our guild. So taking you all on a dungeon run should be expected.” Nie Yan nodded his head before scanning over the group. Aside from him, there were nineteen other players, many of their faces he still recognized. Surprisingly, among them was also [Dusk](#).

Dusk is Sleepy Fox’s subordinate. He first appears in Chapter 44.

“Your guild isn’t doing anything today?”

Dusk let out an awkward laugh. “No, nothing for today. We do have plans for tomorrow though. I’m just here to mooch for equipment.”

Since Dusk was currently wearing the Guilt Domain Set, and with Medusa’s Lair already open, his true intention probably wasn’t so simple as merely obtaining gear. The most likely scenario was that Sleepy Fox had figured out that Nie Yan was behind Tang Yao establishing a guild. And so, he sent Dusk here

with the special purpose of investigating. However, he and Nie Yan could be regarded as having some friendship. He was a sensible fellow and knew better than to start a pointless conflict. After all, compared to the other major guilds, he knew a bit more about the cards in Nie Yan's hands. There was the Starry Night Potion Shop and Nie Yan's mysterious background. He wouldn't rashly ruin their relationship. If anything, there was a chance of seeing a possible alliance between Asskickers United and Holy Empire in the future.

"I disbanded the team. You can create a new one now," Yu Lan said.

Nie Yan nodded and began sending invites to everyone.

Yao Yao has joined your team.

Young Sparrow Hawk has joined your team.

...

"Nirvana Flame, you're already Level 16!? So fast!" Yao Yao said after receiving quite a shock. Without his consent, Tang Yao didn't dare to tell others, so Yao Yao and the rest had remained completely unaware of Nie Yan's current level. Even though everyone figured it was pretty high by now, they never expected him to be Level 16.

"Why aren't you on the leaderboards?" Moon Child slightly knitted her brows as she asked in a puzzled manner.

“He hid it. That’s why he isn’t on the leaderboards,” Guo Huai answered. Thanks to this, he confirmed his guild leader’s suspicions which were the same as his own. It appeared Nie Yan wished to keep a low-profile.

A thought suddenly popped into the minds of almost everyone present. What if first and second place on the leaderboards were both occupied by members of Asskickers United? What kind of shock would this give to the other guilds? They could hardly imagine.

Soon, everyone entered Nie Yan’s team.

“Just like last time, I want everyone to report their relevant stats,” Nie Yan ordered. He already knew that Yu Lan’s team met the requirements to enter the dungeon, but just to be on the safe side, he needed to know the individual stats of each team member as well. If it turned out one of them failed to reach the bar, then they definitely couldn’t go forward with the run.

Everyone would have to be serious when running a dungeon. Otherwise, even the smallest lapse in judgement could lead to their team being wiped. Wiping once might not be a serious setback for a team, but losing 20% of your experience bar was enough to cause any player to feel pain in their heart.

Yu Lan, Bai Kaishui (Plain Boiled Water), and the rest all began announcing their stats one after the other, defense, magic power, health, etc...

“520 health, 180 defense...”

“320 health, 158 magic power...”

...

After everyone finished, Nie Yan nodded his head. It seemed Yu Lan and her team had spent a lot of effort in improving their gear, especially Bai Kaishui. Having 520 health and 180 defense at this stage of the game was pretty good.

Just as Nie Yan and company were about to set off on their run, a huge group of players emerged from the nearby boulders and began quickly surrounding them from all directions.

There were roughly three hundred of them. They had completely sealed off any routes that Nie Yan and his team could escape from.

Nie Yan's expression turned cold. These players obviously weren't coming with good intentions.

What's going on? Nie Yan sank into deep thought after glancing at the group of approaching players. They certainly came well-prepared. Their equipment was excellent, and all of them looked to be around Level 10.

“Who are these players?” Tang Yao tightly clenched his staff. He

sensed that they were hostile.

Yu Lan and her team quickly assumed a battle formation with all the frontliners forming a circular wall.

“I’ve met a few of the players over there. They’re part of Victorious Return,” Dusk whispered as he stood by Nie Yan’s side.

Nie Yan’s gaze fell on the two players taking the lead, a tall Elementalist and a slim Thief that resembled a monkey. Among them was surprisingly the group of players he had seen earlier in Tanbeto Town.

“We’re completely surrounded. They have at least three hundred players on their side!” Bai Kaishui nervously said. Their team only consisted of twenty players while the other side had over three hundred, and the equipment they wore wasn’t the least bit lacking compared to theirs!

The difference in manpower was too large. As soon as the other side acted, their entire team was guaranteed to be wiped out!

Worst of all, they weren’t inside a dungeon. If they died in a dungeon, they would only lose 20% of their experience bar, plus they wouldn’t drop any equipment. However, if they died here, they would drop an entire level and lose a piece of equipment!

Who could stay calm in a situation like this!?

At this moment, Nie Yan suddenly realized that dropping a level and a piece of equipment wasn't the main issue. It was him losing the two chapters from the Book of Order in his bag and Tang Yao losing his Arcane Fairy!

Before he was even able to achieve his goal, could it be that everything he worked so painstakingly hard for would come crashing down at this very moment?

It was already too late to use a Return Scroll to escape. These players had already gotten too close. They would be able to cancel it as soon as they began chanting!

“Hey, Skinny Dog. There's a saying called, ‘like shooting fish in a barrel.’ I think this perfectly describes the situation right now!” The tall Elementalist began laughing wildly. “No matter how strong that Nirvana Flame is, it won't matter. They're all as good as dead!”

The Thief called Skinny Dog licked the blade of his dagger as he eyed Nie Yan and the others like lambs to the slaughter.

“They're acting like cornered rats. Kekeke... with only twenty of them, do they really think they stand a chance against us?” Skinny Dog mocked.

“Remember, don't let your subordinates attack first. Just send a couple of people up. We gotta make Nirvana Flame get a red name first. The boss made it clear that he wants that guy to lose all his equipment. Just one piece won't do!”

“No worries, I understand!” Skinny Dog began playing with the dagger in his hand. What he loved to do the most was to make others bleed. The feeling of stabbing flesh and blood gushing out was simply the best.

These players were aiming for him. Nie Yan stared at the scrawny Thief, who was only about one and a half meters tall, and seemingly recalled there being such a person in his past. Despite not being a Shadow Dancer himself, that guy had actually managed to kill one. Ranked number six in all of Victorious Return, his reputation definitely preceded him.

Chapter 149 – A Sentiment Known As Comradery!

Among the many famous Thieves from Nie Yan's past, Skinny Dog was the most brutal and cunning. With his treacherous methods of mounting sneak attacks, he was known for being as annoying to deal with as a giant wad of gum. As soon as he found a target, he'd latch on and never let go. Willing to chase an opponent to the ends of the earth if it meant he could kill them, it was precisely such tenacity that had allowed him to hunt down a Shadow Dancer in the previous timeline.

As for the Elementalist, he was called Underworld Flame. He couldn't quite seem to remember, but if he recalled correctly, he was a Great Mage in his past life. Anyhow, since he had a little fame, then his skill couldn't be too lacking either.

Five balls of fire condensed on the tips of Underworld Flame's fingers. Just as you would with a toy, he began playing around with them as they spun and danced above his hand.

"Now how should we play with them?" Underworld Flame's eyes narrowed as he stared at Nie Yan who was less than thirty meters away. The atmosphere suddenly became incredibly tense.

"I heard that Nirvana Flame is an expert. It'd be such a shame if he was killed just like that. I really wanted to have a go at him," Skinny Dog said with slight regret.

Yu Lan ((Blue Feather)) and her team had already gotten into

formation, but they didn't dare to rashly act lest the enemy penetrate their defensive line. Under an assault from over three hundred players, they would die without leaving so much as their ashes, much less a complete corpse.

This was an unavoidable defeat!

They were outnumbered fifteen to one. Not even God would be able to save them from their imminent demise!

"Nie Yan, what are we going to do?" Tang Yao anxiously asked. He never thought they would come across such a calamity. This was facing almost certain death. Even if they were stronger, how could they possibly break out of an encirclement of this scale?

No matter how amazing the player was, it would still be impossible!

The players in front of them weren't like the common fodder that could be seen walking everywhere around the city streets and low-level zones. No, they were Victorious Return's elites!

Since they found a chance to surround Nie Yan and Tang Yao, why would they possibly let them get out of this alive?

Even individually, Yu Lan and her team might not be able to go toe to toe with the players on the other side. As for Nie Yan and Tang Yao, they could probably take on more than ten of them by relying on their skill and level advantage; several dozen—now that

would be as hard as scaling the heavens; however, to take on over a hundred each? Unless godly equipment sets were to somehow fall out of the sky and land right in front of them, they wouldn't stand a chance!

An individual player might be able to outlevel, outskill, or outgear other players, but they would never become invincible.

"There's far too many of them," Bai Kaishui (Plain Boiled Water) said as beads of cold sweat dripped from his forehead.

"Heaven Breaker sure thinks highly of us. These guys are all top-ranking members of Victorious Return. Just a hundred would've been enough to deal with us, but he actually sent three times that to be safe. I guess our reputation really does precede us," Nie Yan said in an unperturbed manner.

As Yao Yao stared at Nie Yan, she couldn't make out the slightest hint of worry in his expression. She couldn't help but admire that about him. In such an abysmal situation, he was still able to keep a cool head.

Any and all escape paths were entirely blocked off. It seemed Heaven Breaker really wanted them dead!

Nie Yan had never forgotten that Victorious Return was after his head. It was just that he didn't fear them while in the wilderness. Even if over several hundred of their members were chasing after him, he was still confident that he would be able to make his escape. However, he had been too cocky. Today, this wasn't a

pursuit but rather an encirclement!

Evidently, these Victorious Return members had been lying in ambush for quite a while, waiting for him to take the bait; otherwise, it would have been impossible for them to corner him in such a way!

His expedition to Black Flame Forest was only a small excursion. Just how did this information leak out?

Nie Yan could only think of one possibility.

He had been sold out! But, by who...? Just who could have sold him out? Anyone in this team could be the perpetrator. Tang Yao? Absolutely not! Yao Yao? Based on his understanding of her personality from his past life, that wasn't likely either. So aside from them, Dusk, Yu Lan, Bai Kaishui, and the rest were all possible suspects!

No one could truly see into the intentions of a person's heart!

Regardless of his suspicions, the true blame laid in his own carelessness. He had vastly underestimated what Victorious Return was capable of. He never thought they would be able to bribe Yu Lan and her team into setting up an ambush like this.

Based on his impression of them from his past life, they were all decent people. For him to make such a gross error in judgement... With him changing his own destiny in this life, who knows how

this could have affected the people around him? If Heaven Breaker had promised them a reward large enough to sway their hearts, it was quite possible that they would agree to setting up this ambush!

Nie Yan coldly swept his gaze over the faces of each member on the team, pausing slightly on Yu Lan herself, before moving on.

All of this was merely suspicion. As of now, he didn't have any conclusive evidence.

However, even if it was just suspicion, he could no longer trust them. He couldn't say for sure whether or not someone here wouldn't suddenly stab him and Tang Yao in the back while they were busy tangling with the members of Victorious Return.

If Yu Lan and her team had truly betrayed him, then he was surrounded by enemies on both sides. In that case, it was useless, no matter how hard he and Tang Yao struggled.

「Tang Yao, if we don't do anything soon, it looks like we'll be dying here. Prepare to lose your Arcane Fairy. We're going to make a break for it. If we don't succeed, then we're going to die for sure...!」Nie Yan sent a whisper. He was also prepared to use Adjudicator of God and Sacrificial Gambit. It was a shame that he would have to delay the quest he'd planned to do with Tang Yao yet again, but if he didn't, then there would no longer be a next time...

If today was really going to be the day of his demise, then the least he could do was give them a proper challenge! He would die

while bathing in the blood of his enemies! When he had put that bullet through Cao Xu's head, he had done so with the exact same conviction!

Tang Yao paused for a moment. Were they really going to die here? Then, he turned to look at the chubby fairy that only knew how to idiotically blow endless bubbles while floating over his shoulder. He really couldn't bear to see it go away. He had long since gotten used to this blue ball following him around and making 'blub blub' sounds wherever they went. Even though it couldn't speak, and was a bit stupid too, it had always been by his side and had never once left.

「Blub blub blub!」The simple-minded little fairy was completely oblivious to its impending fate.

Tang Yao felt a sinking feeling in his chest and the tip of his nose sour. He turned to Nie Yan with a sad look on his face and asked, 「Is there no other way...?」

「No, there isn't. We don't have any alternatives. But if your Arcane Fairy dies, we can just find you a new one! Tang Yao! What matters is that we both live to take our revenge another day...!」Nie Yan tightly grasped the grip of his dagger, his expression serious and brooding. Shit, I've really fallen head-first today... But it doesn't matter, in the future, I'll pay you back ten—no, a hundredfold for this, Heaven Breaker... Just you wait!

Standing by the side, Yu Lan had noticed Nie Yan glancing over her and her teammates, and she was a little taken aback. Why was his expression so cold, as if it could slay demons and gods? It was a

stark contrast to his usual gentle demeanor. Even though she hadn't interacted with him too often, she was still able to roughly determine what kind of person he was. He always wore an amiable smile when with those on his side, and he would only use this sort of icy expression when viewing an enemy. Then, after a moment, it suddenly hit her. He probably suspected that she and her team sold him and Tang Yao out! This notion really wasn't too far fetched. After all, this group of Victorious Return members didn't just pop out of thin air; they had obviously been here for some time now. How else could they have known he was coming? If he wasn't betrayed, then how could he and Tang Yao possibly fall into Victorious Return's trap? Hence, it was completely within reason for him to suspect them!

Yu Lan pushed down her feeling of being wronged. She wasn't afraid of death, but she absolutely could not allow herself nor her team to be dishonored! In a single breath, she said in a cold and solemn tone, "Everyone in the Blue Feather Team, listen up. Nirvana Flame and Young Sparrow Hawk got dragged into this mess because of us. If we hadn't asked them to help with Black Flame Forest, they would've never been surrounded by Victorious Return. Today we've let down the both of them. As a way to make amends, so long as any one of us remains alive, we will protect them while they attempt to break out of this encirclement!"

No one expected Yu Lan to suddenly speak out these words at a time like this.

Bai Kaishui stared at Yu Lan, and after a moment, he finally understood what was going on. He scanned over the crowd and yelled, "Do we have cowards in our team!?"

The rest yelled back in unison, “No!” Each one of them was brimming with valor.

“Big Bro Bai, Captain Yu Lan, you’ve seen for yourselves. Since when have any of us been afraid of dying? It’s only a level, what’s there to fear?!”

“Our Blue Feather Team might not be the best, but we will never let down our comrades! Today’s affair was caused by us calling Nirvana Flame and Young Sparrow Hawk over. So we will bear the full consequences! Show me some courage everyone! Even if we all have to die, we’ll still make sure that the both of them get out of here alive!” Bai Kaishui shouted. As the main tank of the team, he also held quite a bit of influence over them.

They all shouted in unison, “Yeah! Let’s go all out!”

Hearing Yu Lan and Bai Kaishui’s words, the hand Nie Yan used to grip his dagger slightly trembled. As he looked at these teammates who were all prepared to meet their deaths for him, his frigid heart that had long since lost faith in the good of people began feeling a touch of warmth.

There was a type of feeling that could only be felt by people who fought and died together.

That sentiment was known as Comradery!

It far surpassed level, equipment, and stats, and mattered above

all else!

In Battle Crazy Alliance, Kill Love had such honor! Even if he was about to face extermination, he would never abandon his comrades! This was also why Battle Crazy Alliance would never perish, because he had a band of brothers that would pledge their lives for him!

Now, there was also such a group of people by his side! Even if they were going to die, they would still preserve their honor by helping him and Tang Yao escape!

A flash of guilt appeared in his eyes. Perhaps it was wrong of him to suspect Yu Lan and her team. Victorious Return might have found out that he was coming here from somewhere else. When he looked at their determined expressions, he started to feel despicable. After going through two lives, he had forgotten that sense of honor and unyielding pride.

“Moon Child, I’m sorry for getting you involved with this. I shouldn’t have invited you to come along with us,” Yao Yao tugged at Moon Child’s robe and said in a remorseful tone. If she hadn’t convinced her to join, then Moon Child wouldn’t have gotten caught up in such a dangerous situation.

“It’s fine, Yao Yao. We’re sisters who’d go through the nine hells for each other!” Moon Child said with a gentle smile. Like a calm lily swaying in the wind, she was beautiful and pure.

Nie Yan took a deep breath as he began calming his mind. In this

state, he would be able to think quickly and clearly. The enemy had many experts on their side. Getting out of their encirclement would be incredibly difficult. It would be best if they could minimize their losses. However, if he couldn't figure out a plan and Yu Lan's team were exterminated, then he could only go out with a fight!

Victorious Return's frontline was slowly approaching, seemingly waiting for an opportune moment.

Skinny Dog and Underworld Flame were coldly staring at Nie Yan and company. They appeared to be whispering to someone.

Chapter 150 – Reinforcements

Back at Victorious Return's guild headquarters, in their conference room of over several hundred seats, all but two at the very front were empty. In one of them was Heaven Breaker. The other seated person was Chen Bo, who had previously left Yu Lan's team in anger after being repeatedly humiliated by Nie Yan and Tang Yao.

They were currently watching a live video feed, provided by Skinny Dog and Underworld Flame, of the situation right outside the entrance to Black Flame Forest.

Chen Bo's expression was deeply warped as he tightly clenched his fist; his hatred, already seeped deep into the marrow of his bones. Ever since he had been disgraced by Nie Yan in front of Yao Yao and Yu Lan (Blue Feather), he couldn't hope for anything more than to see him die!

"They're dead for sure!" He was relishing in their misfortune as he eagerly watched Nie Yan and company getting surrounded.

On the other hand, Heaven Breaker's expression was tranquil. He didn't merely want Nie Yan dead nor for him to simply lose all of his equipment. No, he wanted to crush him so badly that he wouldn't even be able to raise his head again! He didn't believe for a second that the newly created Asskickers United guild could survive with Nie Yan and Tang Yao taken out of the picture.

"This is thanks to the inside line you provided us," Heaven

Breaker praised as he lightly sipped on a cup of tea.

“No, no, all of this would’ve never been possible if you hadn’t given me the chance,” Chen Bo flattered. He knew the person before him was an influential figure in Calore.

“From now on, you can follow us as part of Victorious Return.”

“Thank you, sir!” Chen Bo was wild with joy.

As the pair continued watching the feed, they focussed their vision on an Arcane Mage at the rearmost of Yu Lan’s team who started chanting a spell. Soon, clumps of arcane flame gradually converged in the air, all the while going almost completely unnoticed by the rest of the team.

So far, everything was going according to Heaven Breaker’s plan.

Just who are they talking to the on the other end? What are they waiting for...? Nie Yan couldn’t help but wonder. Then, his mind trembled as he began scanning the faces of everyone around him. Finally, his gaze fell on an Arcane Mage called Banana who wore a pained expression while seemingly whispering to someone in private chat.

For Nie Yan, everything suddenly became clear. In truth, most of Yu Lan’s (Blue Feather) team was probably innocent in this matter, but they couldn’t avoid having a dirty traitor appear amidst their ranks. However, to destroy a bond forged from going through life-

and-death struggles together was no trivial matter. Hence, no matter how much such a person struggled internally to justify their actions, after betraying those who held their trust dear, it was nearly impossible to prevent the shame in their heart from showing!

They were only caught because Banana was bribed by Victorious Return and colluded with them in setting up this trap.

As the Arcane Fireball formed in his palm, Banana launched it at the Victorious Return members approaching them.

“Banana, what the hell are you doing!?” the teammates beside him shouted.

In the split-second that Banana had cast the spell, Nie Yan tried to disband the team, but just as his finger was about to hit confirm, a loud bang rang in his ears as the Arcane Fireball struck a Victorious Return member square on.

His heart sank. He was still a step too late!

Skinny Dog checked the system notification that appeared.

Banana has attacked a member of your team. Since the opposing player is part of another team, your team is free to retaliate in self-defense. Duration: 30 minutes.

He revealed a sinister grin, then pointed forward and said, “Kill!”

A swarm of spells blotted the sky, heading straight for Nie Yan and the others.

Since a member of their team had drawn first blood, Nie Yan and his group had no hope of being protected by the system!

Bai Kaishui (Plain Boiled Water) brandished his greatsword and slashed Banana, then followed with a Flaming Slash, killing him instantly. His expression was very unsightly. Never did he think that a friend, who he had spent so much time levelling with, would actually turn traitor.

“Kill! We’re going to open a path for Nirvana Flame and Young Sparrow Hawk to escape!” Bai Kaishui took the vanguard and charged forward. Soon after, he was followed by the rest of the team.

Yu Lan also bravely charged forward with Nie Yan and Tang Yao in tow.

As Victorious Return launched their first wave of magic, nearly a hundred spells bombarded the area, creating a spectacular sight to behold.

Two of the Mages in Yu Lan’s team moved forward to shield Nie Yan and Tang Yao.「Bang! Bang! Bang!」After the barrage subsided,

the team's numbers were instantly reduced by five as the fallen members turned into rays of light which floated up into the sky.

Just a few seconds ago, these teammates had been perfectly fine, and yet, almost in an instant, they were turned into unrecognizable corpses.

“God dammit!” Tang Yao angrily cursed as he began shooting out Arcane Fireballs like crazy. In that moment, all the players around him were able to witness his firepower.

Sparks flew everywhere as one of these Arcane Fireballs struck a Victorious Return member head-on. -438 That player died in an instant.「Bang! Bang! Bang!」As Tang Yao's spells exploded across the battlefield, he managed to reduce the number of players on Victorious Return's side by five as well.

In a short while, Tang Yao's name became crimson red. However, lost in his bloodlust, he didn't stop firing.

Bai Kaishui was the first to enter the melee. He struck out with a Shield Bash, knocking an enemy Warrior aside, and charged forward.

“Kill!”

The little over a dozen remaining players on their side were surrounded by almost three hundred enemies.

In this situation, even Nie Yan was fired up. If he continued hiding by the sidelines, then he would be letting down these comrades who were staking their lives just to get him out!

Adjudicator of God!

When activated, become immune to all magic, gain 500 health, and summon an advanced life-saving shield that absorbs sixty percent of all incoming damage for five minutes. (this skill cannot be used in instances)

Nie Yan immediately gained 500 extra maximum health as a faint, blue shield enveloped him. As a Fighter charged at him from the front while two nearby Mages were chanting their magic, he suddenly exploded forth with power. Sparks danced around his dagger, and he struck forward like a lightning bolt, stabbing at the Fighter.

「Clang!」The dagger collided with the Fighter's armour, which offered little to no resistance, and a split-second later, it pierced through and planted itself deep into the Fighter's chest.

-540

With an expression of indescribable shock on his face, the Fighter saw his health plummet to zero before he collapsed to the ground.

He could have never imagined that Nie Yan would be able to gib him in an instant.

The Chapter of Freedom and the Chapter of Courage... as two Legendary item fragments, their combined skills were bound to be terrifying. At this stage of the game, they were unrivalled in their capacity for slaughter!

The two Mages behind the now fallen Fighter were shocked. They didn't think a Thief would be able to so easily break through their frontline. They were still in the midst of chanting their spells, and it was already too late for them to cancel.

Nie Yan had already dashed forward and struck one of the them, an Elementalist, with Concussive Blow, putting them into a dazed state, and then, with Vital Strike, his dagger flashed across their throat as blood splashed into the air.

Assassinate!

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They didn't even have time to react before dropping dead on the ground.

Nie Yan's movements were lightning-fast and efficient. After finishing off the Elementalist within seconds, he moved on to their companion, an Arcane Mage, who attempted to flee, but before they could get very far, he struck them in the back of the head with Smothering Strike, then followed up with Backstab and Eviscerate, tearing a large hole in their back.

Like the Elementalist and Fighter before, the Arcane Mage also collapsed to the ground without putting up much of a fight.

Not pausing for even a second, he charged into a crowded area and threw down a pouch of Intermediate Flash Powder.「Poof!」It was almost as if a second sun had appeared right in the middle of the battlefield as blinding rays of light enveloped the surroundings.

The strong radiance stabbed into the eyes of about fifty or so Victorious Return members.

Dusk also burst into action. No longer caring for the consequences of dying while branded with a red name, he let loose with an Arcane Flame Burst and instagibbed two Victorious Return members in quick succession. His damage was also nothing to be scoffed at.

A second wave of spells came flying over from Victorious Return's side and killed another five members of the team. Now, there were only nine teammates left, yet none of them so much as slowed for half a breath as they continued to push forward.

“Kill!!!” Tang Yao frantically shouted. In spite of the danger he would be putting himself into, he chugged down a low-level potion and began chanting Meteor.

With the support of a Rank 3 Arcane Fairy, he would only need to spend three seconds to cast it.

However, in such a hectic battle, he could easily be killed off in these three seconds. If he was interrupted, then he'd be done for!

Spotting Tang Yao starting the chant for Meteor, Nie Yan retrieved another pouch of Intermediate Flash Powder.「Poof!」The members of Victorious Return felt scorching pain burn in their eyes as a brilliant flash of light enveloped the battlefield once more.

With everybody in the vicinity losing their vision, Tang Yao was able to freely cast Meteor. Soon, wave after wave of meteors began to fall down from the sky like a torrential downpour.「Bang! Bang! Bang!」It bombarded the area most concentrated with Victorious Return players.

A deluge of damage values floated up into the sky. None of the players caught in the radius of the spell were able to withstand his damage. And before long, thirty players or so collapsed to the ground, all dead, like souls being harvested by the reaper's scythe!

The area was in a complete mess after being scorched black by the barrage of meteors.

Back at Victorious Return guild headquarters, Heaven Breaker's eyelids twitched as he watched this scene unfold from the live video feed. The several dozen players Tang Yao had just killed weren't some ordinary players. No, they were the cream of the crop, some of the finest elites that Victorious Return had to offer! Yet in front of Tang Yao's frightening damage, they were simply pigs to the slaughter.

Nie Yan recklessly threw down several more pouches of intermediate Flash Powder, causing a massive disturbance to the Victorious Return members in the area. At the same time, his attacks were also ferocious. As he circled round their backs, with a sharp flash of his dagger, an enemy would collapse to the ground every few seconds!

None of them had ever encountered a Thief with such terrifying damage!

After taking down six Victorious Return players, aside from Shadow Dance and Disappear, the rest of his skills were now all on cooldown.

Even though a Thief's burst damage was astonishing, as soon as they used up all their skills, they were like a tiger without its teeth, a leather-armoured target that could be easily taken out!

A Thief dashed toward Nie Yan with the pommel of their dagger aimed right at his head.

Concussive Blow!

Nie Yan sidestepped the attack, and then, he switched to a reverse grip and plunged his dagger into the Thief's back.

The Thief was left stupefied when his attack missed. A blur passed his eyes, and to his shock, he noticed Nie Yan had already

gotten behind him.

-180

A damage value floated up above the Thief's head.

Even if all my attack skills are on cooldown, I'd still have no problem killing you!

「Bang! Bang! Bang!」Three spells arrived from the nearby Mages and landed on Nie Yan's body. Yet none of them were able to deal any damage because they were nullified by Adjudicator of God's shield!

“Holy shit! He's immune to magic!”

“Use arrows and crossbow bolts! Warriors, charge at him!” Skinny Dog ordered. He never thought Nie Yan would have a skill that made him immune to magic.

The Thieves with bows and crossbows all took them out before taking aim and firing at Nie Yan.

Enduring these attacks, Nie Yan slashed down with his dagger.

-250

Another damage value floated up above the Thief's head.

It was a critical hit! The Thief crumpled to the ground.

That's the eighth... Nie Yan checked his status bar. His name only turned a deeper shade of red as he killed more players, but now, there were even tinges of violet.

However, he didn't have the most severe PKer status. No, that would go to Tang Yao or Dusk whose names had long since turned violet and were now already turning black.

Nie Yan glanced at his team window. Excluding him, there were only five teammates left alive: Dusk, Tang Yao, Yao Yao, Moon Child, and Yu Lan. Since Bai Kaishui had taken up the vanguard, he had eaten up most of the damage, but his health could only hold out for so long, and he had just recently fallen. The remaining six of them had little health remaining and were on their last legs.

After attracting too much attention from his reckless use of Flash Powder and daringly charging into enemy lines, even Nie Yan who had the shield from Adjudicator of God only had a fifth of his health remaining.

Worst of all, there were still over two hundred enemies standing! Like an endless tide, they kept pouring in from all sides!

Nie Yan quickly made up his mind. If they hoped to survive, then

they would have to clear a path by making Tang Yao's Arcane Fairy self-destruct!

“Kill!” Tang Yao shouted at the top of his lungs. He had never stopped casting magic, and his health was already falling in the double digits. Nie Yan grouped back up with him and wrapped him up with an Intermediate Combat Bandage.

+20, +20, +20...

After enduring Victorious Return's assault, Tang Yao's Arcane Fairy only had a sliver of health remaining.

“Goodbye, buddy...!” Tears ran down Tang Yao's eyes. This was his very first familiar. He really couldn't bear to make it self-destruct.

“Comrades, today... we kill!” Suddenly, a deafening roar rang out across the battlefield, drawing the attention of everyone present and causing them to pause.

Chapter 151 – Self-Destruct!

In Nie Yan's team, none of the six members who were still clinging to life had a name that wasn't branded deeply crimson. For them to die here would represent a serious setback to their progression. All of the equipment they had painstakingly collected piece by piece would fall into enemy hands, to say nothing of the several levels they would lose as well. The effort they had expended since starting this game would also go down the drain. Such an outcome would prove an extremely depressing conclusion to this battle.

Nonetheless, it was too late for regrets. Their eyes were already heavily bloodshot as they lost themselves in a murderous frenzy.

Nie Yan had killed six Victorious Return players in quick succession, and then, by relying on his sharp instincts and deadly reflexes, he was able to cut down another five. His name was bright red as if it had been washed in the blood of those he had slain.

Among the six, Nie Yan, Tang Yao, and Dusk were the most terrifying. All of their kill counts were already in the double digits.

「Nirvana Flame, just hold on a little longer. My boss will be arriving soon with backup!」Dusk shouted in the team intercom. He was already giving it his all.

Suddenly, a dozen spells arced through the sky and exploded in the area around him, sending him flying. After crashing to the

ground, he struggled to no avail as his health bar finally plummeted to zero before all of the equipment dropped from his body.

Will Holy Empire really be coming? A sudden thought popped up in Nie Yan's head. If Holy Empire really did involve themselves with this matter, then it would be tantamount to them breaking off relations with Victorious Return. Would they truly be willing to wade into these turbulent waters?

At that moment, a shocking rallying cry came from the far ends of the battlefield followed by the emergence of three hundred players, dressed in mediocre equipment, charging forward from every direction.

“Violet Berserk Blade, you said it yourself. When we get back, you definitely have to give us merit points!”

“Watchful Snail, you promised us, so don't go back on your word!”

“Rest assured, I stake my honour as a senior officer of the guild. Today, everyone here will become honorary members of Asskickers United!”

“Long live Violet Berserk Blade! Long live Watchful Snail! Long live Asskickers United! Leave none of those bastards from Victorious Return alive!”

“Charge!”

Nie Yan originally didn't hold high hopes of receiving any reinforcements whatsoever from their newly established Asskickers United. After all, it was full of new recruits who didn't yet feel any sense of belonging to the guild. So why would they suddenly be willing to put their lives on the line just to save a few people? Even if they were, would they really be willing to offend Victorious Return? What if Asskickers United ended up collapsing in the near-future, then what would become of them? Would they be hunted down like dogs, cowering in the shadows? The risk was simply too high.

Nevertheless, even though Nie Yan didn't have much faith, thankfully Tang Yao did, contacting Guo Huai, Hao Cheng, and Zhao Li almost as soon as they were surrounded. After being informed of the situation, worry overtook the trio as they hastily gathered a host of players for a rescue mission, promising honorary membership and a certain amount of merit points in return.

When a portion of the players at the guild headquarters heard the guild leader was in trouble, and that they would be able to earn membership and merit points by joining a rescue mission to save him, they immediately flocked forward to volunteer. They were hot-blooded youths who still felt a sense of romanticism toward the game, and besides, many of them only wished to join the guild because they disliked the tyranny of Victorious Return. Their levels might not be high, with most of them averaging around Level 7 or 8, but they were all full of spirit! Hence, out of the over six thousand players there, Guo Huai and Hao Cheng managed to bring nearly three hundred to their cause. After anxiously rushing

over to the battlefield, they charged into battle as soon as they saw Nie Yan and company still barely hanging on.

“Save the guild leader!”

“Victorious Return, you sons of bitches, I’ll kill all of you!”

Skinny Dog, Underworld Flame, and the other Victorious Return members sneered when they saw this ragtag band of players with mediocre gear. They slaughtered the oncoming players without breaking a sweat and demolished any semblance of a formation they had.

Truthfully, this result didn’t come as a surprise. The Victorious Return members were all at least Level 10 while the reinforcements Guo Huai brought over were only around Level 7. It was practically the same as throwing eggs at a brick wall.

During their first collision, the reinforcements from Asskickers United lost over thirty players, but those who survived kept pushing forward, disturbing the enemy’s formations and rhythm as they displayed the zeal of undying cockroaches. With six or seven of them swarming a single player, they were also able to overwhelm quite a few Victorious Return members, most of whom were Mages.

Even though they were trading five, six, seven lives or more to take down a single enemy, it was still well worth it. After all, their foes were the elite members of Victorious Return!

Losing two thousand or so ordinary members might not mean anything to a formidable guild such as Victorious Return, but if over a hundred of their elites died, then they would've truly been dealt a heavy blow.

In fact, this battle illustrated a certain truth in life. Even if someone was a powerful elite, they could still be defeated with numbers.

After the reinforcements arrived, the pressure on Nie Yan's group lessened significantly. With Yu Lan (Blue Feather) at the lead, Nie Yan in the middle, and Yao Yao, Moon Child, and Tang Yao following from behind, they redoubled their efforts to break through the encirclement.

When Skinny Dog and Underworld Flame saw Nie Yan and his group attempting to escape, they anxiously shouted in the team intercom,「Don't let Nirvana Flame and Young Sparrow Hawk escape! Kill them!」

After which Skinny Dog dashed straight for them.

Several spells accompanied by a volley of arrows whizzed past Skinny Dog as they flew in Nie Yan's direction.

Nie Yan would be dead if these arrows struck him! And in such a crowded space, he had no hope of effectively evading. He chugged down a Basic Health Potion and resigned himself to his fate. If he had an Intermediate Health Potion, then perhaps he'd be able to safely endure the damage. Regrettably, however, the Starry Night

Potion Shop had yet to produce any.

Yu Lan (Blue Feather) suddenly moved to cover his flank.「Bang! Bang! Bang!」The slew of arrows and spells bombarded her body. As her corpse was sent flying, her equipment fell to the ground.

Nie Yan was surprised. He never expected for Yu Lan to sacrifice herself to protect him.

The group of Warriors from the reinforcements bravely charged into enemy lines. Even though they were like ants that could be easily crushed to these members of Victorious Return, they gritted their teeth and pressed forward.

As a wave of spells fell over them, five of them were instantly turned into rays of light.

Finally, Guo Huai, Hao Cheng, and the other reinforcements managed to make their way to Nie Yan and the surviving members.

“Nirvana Flame, Young Sparrow Hawk, we’re here!” Placing himself in front, Hao Cheng’s large frame immediately shielded almost all of Nie Yan.

“Protect Nirvana Flame and Young Sparrow Hawk! Help them get out of here!” For the fledging guild, Asskickers United, these two existences were simply too invaluable!

Under the constant barrage of magic, quite a few more of their members fell.

Now, only about eighty out of the nearly three hundred reinforcements remained. They were all simply too weak. Not even a few moments later, their numbers were yet again reduced to about sixty. However, Victorious Return had also suffered disastrous losses with about a hundred fifty or so troops still standing.

Skinny Dog brought a group of a dozen Thieves with him as he rapidly approached Nie Yan and the others in a bid to sneak lethal attacks in from all sides.

“Die!” Skinny Dog swept his dagger across a Warrior’s throat, then circled behind and stabbed them in the back with Eviscerate. 「Thud!」That Level 7 Warrior collapsed dead on the ground.

These Thieves were exceptionally fierce, capable of finishing off an opponent within seconds of engaging them. The reinforcements around Nie Yan were dropping like flies.

When he and Tang Yao entered the edge of the enemy’s encirclement, Yao Yao and Moon Child were able to safely escape while protected by a group of players.

“Stop them! Don’t let them escape!” Skinny Dog shouted. A dozen Thieves quickly surrounded Nie Yan and Tang Yao.

Skinny Dog pounced forward with his dagger stabbing toward Nie Yan's face.

Nie Yan tilted his neck to the side and avoided the attack, but Skinny Dog quickly followed up with a backstab.

He was already like a dried up oil lamp. All of his skills were on cooldown, and he only had 120 health remaining. It was impossible for him to match Skinny Dog in this state, so all he could do was dodge to the best of his ability.

Not only had those Thieves launched deadly sneak attacks, they also once again barred the path forward.

Of course, none of that mattered if he was still tangling with Skinny Dog, leaving him incapable of fleeing in the first place.

Tang Yao only had around a little over 60 health left while his Arcane Fairy still had a small sliver. It appeared that at any moment now they would become corpses on the battlefield.

Even though he couldn't bear losing his Arcane Fairy, Tang Yao quickly came to a resolve after seeing how the situation was developing. He brandished his staff and cast Dreadful Howl!

“Nirvana Flame, I'll send you out of here!”

As the ear-ringing screech coming out of Tang Yao entered the ears of the surrounding Victorious Return members, they were

inflicted with the fear status and couldn't help but begin to disperse.

“Paladins, Divine Word!”

“Priests, Dispel!”

As Underworld Flame gave out these orders, the Paladins and Priests in the rear quickly removed the fear status caused by Tang Yao's Dreadful Howl.

「Poof!」Nie Yan threw down another pouch of Intermediate Flash Powder. The glaring radiance pierced into the eyes of the surrounding players, causing them to temporarily lose vision. Having just cast Divine Word and Dispel, the Paladins and Priests were temporarily unable to remove the blind status.

Dreadful Howl was ineffective in the faces of so many enemy Paladins and Priests. However, Nie Yan's Intermediate Flash Powder would allow the spell to show its fullest effect. Inflicted with both the fear and blind status, a path outward was immediately opened.

“Young Sparrow Hawk, we have a chance!” Nie Yan shouted upon spotting the opening.

“Nirvana Flame, go without me! I won't be able to escape!” Tang Yao's eyes were completely bloodshot. Even if he made a break for it, the thing near and dear to his heart, his Arcane Fairy, wouldn't

be able to make it out alive!

He had given it his best, but in the end, his best just wasn't good enough. As magic rained down from above, he awaited the moment when his Arcane Fairy would meet its irreversible fate!

“Kill!” Tang Yao shouted with a furious expression. As he ordered his Arcane Fairy to self-destruct, it began expanding like a balloon, the energy inside rapidly condensing as it drew in mana from its surroundings. Finally, when it reached a critical mass, the giant blue ball gave a slight tremble...「BOOM!」All of the stored energy was released in an instant, creating an ear-splitting explosion that swiftly engulfed all of the Victorious Return members in the vicinity.

As if a tornado was passing through, the shock wave reached a level of power that could destroy everything in its path!

The Arcane Fairy's self-detonation swept up over thirty Victorious Return players in a flash, disintegrating everything within the explosion's radius.

After the battlefield settled down, the Arcane Fairy vanished into the air and the Arcane Crystal in Tang Yao's bag gradually lost its shimmer, becoming nothing more than a lifeless rock.

Tang Yao brandished his staff with a crazed and murderous glint in his eyes. Seeing his Arcane Fairy die, he felt as if a hole had been carved out of his heart.

“Young Sparrow Hawk, let’s go!” Nie Yan anxiously yelled. Even though eight of the Thieves had died, there were still quite a few left and the fear status inflicted upon them was about to wear off. If they didn’t escape now, they would no longer have the chance to.

However, lost in grief, Tang Yao didn’t listen to Nie Yan’s urging. His Arcane Fairy dying had been too big of a blow to his heart. At this moment, he wanted nothing more than to murder all of the bastards who caused its death!

The Victorious Return members still standing were badly frightened by the explosion of the Arcane Fairy. In the blink of an eye, over thirty of their members had been wiped out.

Skinny Dog and the rest of the surviving Thieves awakened from their feared state. After which two of them pounced on Tang Yao while the rest dashed toward Nie Yan.

Nie Yan didn’t have much health or skills left. He could only use Shadow Dance to evade. For Tang Yao, after casting Dreadful Howl and ordering his Arcane Fairy to self-destruct, all of his offensive spells were now on cooldown. Even though he had plenty of defensive spells at his disposal, they would be useless in getting him out of this predicament.

The elite battalion of over three hundred Victorious Return players were thrown into complete disarray. Now, barely a third of their troops remained, scattered about across the battlefield.

Suddenly, a massive, dense cloud of fire spread across the sky, creating wisps of flames that rose into the air.

“It’s Scorching Meteor!” Underworld Flame cried out in alarm. As he searched around for the caster, his gaze fell on a Mage standing among the piles of rubble in the far distance chanting the magic. The spell truly did live up to its fame. He was able to recognize it instantly as the Templar Magic, Scorching Meteor!

As for the Mage casting it, they seemed a little familiar. If he recalled correctly, this was Cold Maple from Holy Empire! His chest tightened. Why was Holy Empire suddenly entering the fray!?

Chapter 152 – Glaring Red Name

Back at Victorious Return guild headquarters, Heaven Breaker was so infuriated that he could no longer calmly stay seated on his throne as he watched the live video feed. If those reinforcements hadn't arrived, no matter how much stronger Nie Yan and Tang Yao were, they would have still succumbed to death in the end. Even though he was bound to suffer enormous losses, enough to feel as though his heart was bleeding, he only had a single objective in mind, to completely crush the pair... because he had an inkling of a feeling that they truly posed a threat to him like no other before. Truthfully, even when the reinforcements from Asskickers United arrived, he had still been as steady as Mt. Tai. After all, those mediocre forces were nowhere near the level of the elites of his guild. However, with the sudden emergence of Holy Empire, his plans had truly gone awry.

“Dammit! It's Holy Empire!” Heaven Breaker's expression turned hideous. He now regretted not being there to personally lead this operation himself. To lose three hundred elites and still not accomplish his objective, such a bitter pill was simply too hard to swallow.

Lost in the fervour of battle, Nie Yan and the others didn't expect a new force to jump into the fray. Holy Empire had actually decided to involve themselves! With more reinforcements coming to his aid, Nie Yan felt the tension in his mind easing significantly. I suppose I owe Sleepy Fox a favour this time.

When Scorching Meteor appeared, all of the Victorious Return players were quivering in fear at the might of such a formidable spell. In the face of its frightening damage, even a high-health

Fighter would be unable to endure, to say nothing of squishier classes.

As the sky was covered in blazing clouds of fire, the magic energy in the atmosphere stirred restlessly, growing ever stifling and oppressive.

“Paladins, quickly silence him!” Skinny Dog shouted in a panic. He had experienced the might of Templar Magic, Elemental Hall Magic, and Obscurus Magic before. If that Holy Mage was allowed to successfully cast Scorching Meteor, it would spell disaster for what little remained of his forces.

Five Paladins charged toward the pile of rubble and boulders where Cold Maple was standing.

But just as they were closing in, a dozen Warriors from Holy Empire leaped out from behind the boulders and intercepted them. Each of the warriors sought out a target as they blocked the Paladins from advancing. How could they possibly let these players do as they pleased?

When they saw their Paladins getting intercepted, Skinny Dog and the others’ faces fell.

“Everyone, fall back! Holy Empire, you dogshit-eating bastards!” Skinny Dog and the other Victorious Return members bolted away in a bid to get out of the spell’s range. They would have to delay killing Nie Yan and Tang Yao for now. After they were all safe, they could regroup and act from there.

After escaping the encirclement, Moon Child was finally free from being obstructed. She cast Lesser Heal on Tang Yao, raising his health by a good amount as a gentle radiance enveloped him, and then followed up with Divine Radiance Shield.

Earlier, she didn't receive much damage, but her spells would constantly be silenced by the enemy Paladins. With so many silencers focusing their attention on her, she hadn't be able to cast even a single Lesser Heal.

She had no idea why they were mainly focusing on her, but perhaps it had to do with Dusk and Tang Yao's resistances being too high, particularly the latter's. With such a large level disparity between them and their target, their silences were pretty much ineffective, hence they threw all their Silences on her.

Moon Child brought Tang Yao back from the brink of death to being somewhat healthy again, saving his life.

"Young Sparrow Hawk, quickly escape!" Nie Yan anxiously shouted. Scorching Meteor was about to finish casting. If he didn't run now, then he would definitely die!

Prior to Holy Empire's emergence, Tang Yao had fired off spells like a madman, but without his Rank 3 Arcane Fairy, his damage had dropped noticeably and his cooldowns and cast times rose back to their original values. Nevertheless, by relying on his level superiority alone, he had still been able to inflict some serious damage.

And so, after being caught off guard by the Arcane Fairy's explosion, the Victorious Return players were scattered and in disarray, and before they could reorganize and launch a counterattack, several more of them were annihilated by his spells.

With that, Tang Yao's kill count had risen to ninety-two!

Such a number was enough to terrify anyone on the battlefield! From when he first opened with Meteor to ordering his Arcane Fairy to self-destruct, he inflicted massive casualties on the enemy's forces. Those he killed weren't ordinary schmucks that could be found off any city street either; no, they were the elites of Victorious Return! Yet he was picking them off like clay pigeons at a shooting range!

After falling on deaf ears for so long, Nie Yan's words finally got through to Tang Yao, and he soon regained some clarity. He absolutely could not afford to die! With how heavy his PKer status was, he'd drop by at least five levels if he died now!

Fortunately, the Arcane Fairy's explosion had wiped all of the Victorious Return members in his immediate vicinity, and adding the threat of Scorching Meteor, there were no longer any enemies trying to prevent Tang Yao from escaping.

Tang Yao hastily began running to Moon Child and the others. He'd be done for if he didn't get out of Scorching Meteor's range in time!

“You still want to leave after killing so many people!?” Skinny Dog shouted from a distance away. His eyes flared with anger. Among those ninety-two players who died, how many had been brothers that he’d gone through life and death battles with? As soon as he saw Tang Yao attempting to run, his eyes became bloodshot and he turned around and dashed toward him in a bid to prevent his escape. In spite of the looming danger of Scorching Meteor, he did it all for the sake of avenging his fallen brothers.

Noticing Skinny Dog pursuing Tang Yao, Nie Yan turned around to stop him.

“I’ll cover for you! Quickly, run!” Nie Yan shouted after Tang Yao. Crushing a Basic Haste Scroll in his hand, he rapidly closed in on Skinny Dog.

Tang Yao didn’t dare to dally as he began to run for safety.

Sadly, a Mage was no match for the speed of a Thief.

Closing the gap in no time, Skinny Dog lunged forward and aimed his dagger at the back of Tang Yao’s head.

In that instant, Nie Yan leaped forward and intercepted Skinny Dog from the flank.

「Clang!」Sparks flew everywhere as the daggers clashed together.

Skinny Dog wished to prevent Tang Yao from getting away, but

now with Nie Yan firmly blocking his path, getting to him was going to be near impossible!

Roughly five to six hundred more Holy Empire players emerged in a nearby open space. The Priests from Holy Empire began to cast Heal on Tang Yao, causing his health to almost instantly rise back to full.

With Adjudicator of God running out just now, Nie Yan stopped tangling with Skinny Dog when he saw Tang Yao had gotten a safe distance away and began to flee himself.

Everyone wanted to get out of the immediate range of Scorching Meteor. Nie Yan, Skinny Dog, and the others were near the edge of the spell's range, so they still had a chance of making it out unscathed, but for the many others at the center, all of whom were part of Victorious Return, they didn't have the slightest hope of surviving.

After Cold Maple finished chanting the long set of invocation syllables, scorching-hot meteors of divine fire began raining down from the sky.

As if they would purge the world of everything, the tyrannical flames engulfed the land.

Those directly struck by the meteors lost over two hundred health in an instant. Collapsing one after the other, several dozen more Victorious Return members died. Just like that, the strike force consisting of three hundred elites, tasked with killing Nie

Yan and Tang Yao, was reduced to almost nothing. The ten or so that actually survived had only been able to do so because they were lucky enough to be on the outskirts when the meteors began falling.

Nie Yan, Tang Yao, and Skinny Dog, however, were still within the spell's range.

“Quickly heal those two over there!” Sleepy Fox, who was clad in silver-white armour, shouted as he pointed at Nie Yan and Tang Yao.

After hearing Sleepy Fox's command, the over a hundred Priests on Holy Empire's side began casting their heals.

And then, countless rays of gentle light fell on the pair.

-270, -290, -260... A string of damage values floated up above their heads as they were baptized in the sea of raging flames, but their health bars were completely stable thanks to being constantly topped up by the endless heals.

Over a hundred Priests were simultaneously healing Nie Yan and Tang Yao. So long as none of the meteors killed them instantly, they would be able to safely get out of this ordeal alive!

Having given up all hope, Nie Yan and Tang Yao were caught by surprise when they suddenly pulled away from the grim reaper's grasp. Bathed in gentle light, the pair traversed the shower of

meteors before eventually managing to safely come out on the other side.

Skinny Dog, on the other hand, wasn't so lucky. Not long after taking several steps, he let out a blood-curdling scream and collapsed on the ground.

After surviving that calamity, Nie Yan and Tang Yao felt like they had been given a new lease on life. To run across a field of falling meteors, perhaps there were no others in the world who would dare to attempt such a foolish feat.

Yao Yao and Moon Child were gasping for breath as they ran up to the pair.

“You guys made it out okay! That's great!” Yao Yao rejoiced.

“Whew... that was quite thrilling. Thankfully, you two are alright.” Moon Child was still feeling a bit of an adrenaline rush.

“Hey, thanks for healing me and giving me a shield back there. If it weren't for you, I would've died long ago,” Tang Yao gratefully said. He had acted too rashly back then by letting the death of his Arcane Fairy get the better of him. However, when he thought back to its sacrifice, he couldn't help feeling depressed.

“It's nothing. I know your Arcane Fairy died, but you can still get another one. So don't feel too down,” Moon Child comforted.

Tang Yao showed a faint smile, but anyone could tell he was forcing it.

Yao Yao stared at Nie Yan and said, “Nirvana Flame, you didn’t die even in a situation like that. You’re too amazing! But ughh.... There’s something that’s been really bugging me. What are we going to do about our names? They’re already so red! I’ve already killed five players. I think I’d have to hunt down about 6,000 ordinary mobs before I can get rid of it...”

“I killed eleven, so I’d have hunt down about 20,000,” Nie Yan glanced at his status bar and said with a wry laugh. He was truly fortunate to have lived. Thanks to that, he was able to prevent the chapters from the Book of Order from dropping out of his bag.

Yao Yao stuck out her tongue. He had killed eleven people all by himself. For a Thief, that was a pretty terrifying feat.

“Hah, let me see... I killed... ninety-two...? Wai-what!? There’s no way! This can’t be real... Did the system miscalculate!?” Tang Yao was given quite a shock when he checked his status bar. However, thinking back to the recent battle, perhaps he really did kill ninety-two players... He had been lost in his grief and rage, so he couldn’t say for sure. However, if that was really the case, then how many months, or even years, would it take for him to get rid of his red name...?

As for Moon Child, she was much better off. Putting aside the notion of a Priest being able to kill anyone, she had been silenced so much that she couldn’t even get a proper Heal off. As such, she didn’t have a red name at all.

“You can tag along with Tang Yao and I to hunt Scaled Frogs together then,” Nie Yan suggested. At the moment, that was the fastest way to get rid of their PKer statuses.

“Without my Arcane Fairy, can we still even kill Scaled Frogs...?” Tang Yao asked in a somewhat pessimistic manner.

“You’re Level 17, so we should be able to. If it still doesn’t work out, then we can just hunt the ordinary ones.”

“It’s too bad my Arcane Fairy died,” Tang Yao mopped. From just a moment ago when he was reminded, he had continued feeling sad.

“When your Arcane Fairy died, the Arcane Crystal in your bag didn’t disappear, right? It should just be a lump of rock now. Take it out, and let me see if there are any cracks on it.” Nie Yan suddenly recalled a story he had heard of from his past life. There was a player who had been able to revive their fallen Arcane Fairy, but the road they had walked to accomplish this task had been extremely arduous. In the end, their journey led them to Everlasting City where they had found a way to breathe life back into their Arcane Crystal.

“Yeah, the crystal is there. Before, it was shiny and glistening, but now, it’s completely dim,” Tang Yao replied after taking the crystal out of his bag. Right now, the crystal seemed like nothing more than a dull and ordinary mineral without the slightest shimmer of life. He couldn’t help but ask, “What’s this thing useful

for?”

Nie Yan took the crystal from Tang Yao’s hands and began examining it. After determining that it was completely intact, he faintly smiled and said, “Fortunately, it didn’t break.”

“Tell me, is there a way?” Tang Yao asked, a glimmer of hope shining in his eyes.

Nie Yan pondered for a moment, then said, “It should be possible, but I can’t make any promises.”

Chapter 153 – Ambitions

Nie Yan only knew that a player had collected an Energized Arcane Crystal Core from Everlasting City and used it to resurrect their Arcane Fairy. The only problem was that Everlasting City was a Level 40 zone! The Magic Golems there were machine-type monsters that had very high defense and were extremely tough to deal with. Even though Tasoyi Village had Magic Bombs for sale which were especially effective against machine-type monsters, such expensive items weren't something ordinary players could afford. Even he felt hesitant about using them.

“Nirvana Flame, please tell me how I can resurrect my Arcane Fairy! I need to know!” Tang Yao asked somewhat emotionally. He didn't expect that he'd suddenly see a glimmer of hope in his despair.

“It won't be possible for the time being. We'll have head to Everlasting City to search for an Arcane Energized Core, but the monsters there are Level 40. We're too weak right now, so there's no way we can go there.”

“A Level 40 map?” Tang Yao was a bit taken aback. “How do you know all this?”

“The library and the official website. A quick search on the official forums should get you the answer on how to revive an Arcane Fairy.” Since Nie Yan couldn't exactly reveal himself as a reincarnated person, he pinned everything on the library and the forums. Conviction was true to life in the sense that players would often find themselves growing attached to their familiars after

spending every waking moment in the game with them. Hence, when these familiars died, many players would try to employ a method to revive them. However, these methods were often more difficult than obtaining the familiar in the first place. So generally only a few foolhardy and determined players would go on to attempt the arduous task. Even if they couldn't find what they were searching for in the short term, they would still see a shining glimmer of hope, and given enough time, if they still failed to succeed, they would calm down and move on.

Tang Yao did a search on the official forums, and indeed, three methods came up for reviving an Arcane Fairy. The first method was using an Energized Arcane Crystal Core. As a very rare form of crystal, it had a wide range of applications but was mostly used in manufacturing Magic Golems. It could be found in Level 30 maps or above, but it was exceedingly rare with only a few crystals existing within certain specials maps. The second method was using a Revival Stone, a stone that could revive any familiar, but it only started dropping from Level 60 maps onward. Due to its rarity, a single Revival Stone was worth far more than an Arcane Fairy. In fact, it was only worthwhile to use a Revival Stone on a Rank 5 Arcane Fairy. Anything less would simply be too much of a waste. To illustrate, in Nie Yan's past life, a single Revival Stone could be traded for over a hundred Rank 3 Arcane Fairies. The third and final method was using a Divine Wish Stone. It was so priceless that there didn't even need to be a discussion on how laughably wasteful it would be to use on an Arcane Fairy.

Of course, these methods were the ones achievable in the Viridian Empire. Other places such as the Spring of Life in the Sacred Land of the Fairies in the Satleen Empire, or the mysterious Fate Items in the Land of the Undead all had the ability to resurrect Arcane Fairies and other familiars.

Even though there were so many ways available, out of all of them, Nie Yan's was the most reasonable. At the very least, he knew where he could find an Energized Arcane Crystal Core laying around.

“Wait until we level up some more, then I'll help you revive your Arcane Fairy!”

Having these words, Nie Yan patted him on the shoulder. Tang Yao felt touched and nodded his head.

At that moment, Guo Huai walked up to them. Of the reinforcements he had brought along, only he and three others survived.

“You guys didn't die! That's great,” Guo Huai said as his face lit up with joy. It didn't matter how many of their players died as long as Nie Yan and Tang Yao survived, especially the latter. If Tang Yao died, it would be an absolutely devastating blow to their fledgling guild.

“We were lucky Holy Empire arrived in time to save us,” Nie Yan said with a faint smile.

“You also have connections with people in Holy Empire?” Guo Huai asked. He glanced at the Holy Empire troops across from them. They wore excellent gear, with most of them clad in complete sets. Their orderly ranks and solemn atmosphere left him with quite an impression. A top five guild in the entire

Viridian Empire really was a cut above the rest. As he recalled the mediocre quality of his own reinforcements, he couldn't help but feel ashamed.

“You could say that. We were saved by them this time, so we owe them a favour,” Nie Yan nodded. He then glanced at Guo Huai who seemed a little dejected. “Don't mind it too much. We're still a new guild, of course we aren't close to their level. But you know... even if they're well-known and established names, we'll definitely surpass all other major guilds in the future, including Victorious Return, and become the most powerful guild in the Viridian Empire.”

“Alright.” Guo Huai earnestly nodded his head. He also had great ambitions in his heart. Although Asskickers United was only recently established, they had already created a reputation for themselves and their initial expansion could be considered frighteningly fast.

“I'm gonna head over and have a chat with the guild leader of Holy Empire.” Nie Yan informed Guo Huai, Tang Yao, and the others.

After which he walked over to where Sleepy Fox was standing. As he drew closer, he waved his hand and greeted, “I really have to thank you this time. If you hadn't appeared in time, my friends and I would have definitely died here today.”

“It's nothing,” Sleepy Fox replied with a light smile.

Although Sleepy Fox seemed relaxed on the surface, he was actually deeply worried. How he was going to handle relations between his own guild and Victorious Return was a top priority at the moment. Were they to completely fall out with Victorious Return, then the ramifications would be inconceivable. If Victorious Return started an all-out war with them with no regard for the consequences, then the losses for both guilds would be equally disastrous. However, having taken all of this into consideration, he had still chosen to help Nie Yan.

Firstly, even if Victorious Return held grievances with Holy Empire over this matter, their guild leader, Heaven Breaker, wouldn't likely take it so far where the two guilds would diametrically oppose one another. After all, this wouldn't benefit either of them. Secondly, Nie Yan most likely had a mysterious backer supporting him. Add on the Starry Night Potion Shop, he was definitely worth roping in! Lastly, whether it be dungeoneering, level, or personal ability, Nie Yan was amazingly talented in all respects.

If it weren't for these last two points, he would have never braved the dangers of incurring Heaven Breaker's wrath for the sake of saving Nie Yan.

After giving it a little thought, Nie Yan also roughly understood what led to Sleepy Fox's decision. Everyone here was intelligent, so there was no need for him to lay the facts bare. Regardless of intentions, Sleepy Fox had saved his life, that was without a doubt, so he owed him a favour.

There was no such thing as eternal allies—only eternal interests.

He and Sleepy Fox already had a favourable foundation for cooperation. For him and his fledgling guild, having Holy Empire as an ally was extremely advantageous.

When Guo Huai, Tang Yao, and others saw Nie Yan laughing and chatting with Sleepy Fox, they were all quite amazed. The person he was talking to was the very guild leader of Holy Empire! In all of Calore and even in the entire Viridian Empire, he was a figure who could topple mountains and overturn the seas! Was this really the Nie Yan they all knew? Guo Huai, Tang Yao, and the rest now felt Nie Yan was suddenly deeply wreathed in mystery.

“What are you guys going to do about your red names?” Sleepy Fox asked. He couldn’t help glancing over at Tang Yao in the distance. A player that held the number one position on the level leaderboards, to say nothing of the sheer number of Victorious Return’s elites they had slain, how could such a figure not attract his interest?

The Holy Empire players behind Sleepy Fox also look over at Tang Yao and began commenting in hushed tones.

“Look at his name. It’s so red, it’s pretty much black. Say, how many people do you think he killed?”

“I’m not sure, I’d say at least thirty.”

“It’s hard to estimate.”

In the eyes of these players, Tang Yao was equal to a god or a figure of legends. Little did they know that he was simply a vulgar, lecherous fatty who hated doing any kind of work.

“Of course we plan to get rid of it by hunting mobs, but it’s probably going to take quite a while,” Nie Yan replied.

“You guys will have to be careful while in the wilderness. We can’t say for sure Heaven Breaker won’t keep on coming after you.”

“Don’t worry. After this run-in, we’ll be a lot more careful.”

Besides, they wouldn’t be hunting mobs in low-level zones, so there was no real need to fear Victorious Return catching them off guard again.

“That’s good then.”

“You should worry more about how you’re going to deal with the fallout. I doubt Heaven Breaker will simply forgive you guys for involving yourselves with this. It might even be the trigger for a large-scale guild war.”

“I’m not too worried about that. Heaven Breaker might act like a tyrant, but he does have some rationality. Victorious Return might be big, but there’s nothing they can do to my guild,” Sleepy Fox answered. He had confidence in the strength of his own guild. He then hesitated for a moment but eventually spoke up, “I have a

request for you.”

“Speak. What is it?”

“I’d like to custom order a few high-level concoctions from the Starry Night Potion Shop,” Sleepy Fox said. He actually felt quite embarrassed. Even though Holy Empire was considered a major guild, it actually didn’t have many Alchemists. They were simply too difficult to nurture, and more importantly, very few were willing to join their guild. After all, an Alchemist’s role in a guild was basically no different than a full-time nanny’s. This put Holy Empire in a predicament. Buying concoctions from the auction house was too expensive, and the Starry Night Potion Shop held dominance over more than half of the market in Calore. Even if they were a major guild, they could only succumb to the pressure in the end.

Nie Yan was in a pretty good mood. Bird’s business tactics were extremely effective. He had allowed Bird flaunt their wealth and snatch away the Alchemists of all other shops. He had basically poached every Alchemist that was notable in his past life. Of the ten most famous Alchemists in the Viridian Empire, eight of them were in the Starry Night Potion Shop, while of the remaining two, one was in Victorious Return and the other was in Radiant Sacred Flame. Those two Alchemists were simply too devoted. No matter how much he enticed, they still wouldn’t budge.

Nonetheless, there were already two Alchemists in the Starry Night Potion Shop that had advanced to Intermediate rank. There were even more that broke through to Junior Alchemists at about one hundred and sixty. As for Apprentice Alchemists, they had

well over five hundred. Every day, they would rake in massive amounts of money for the shop.

Right now, Holy Empire's daily expenditure of potions, pills, and other concoctions was mostly provided for by the Starry Night Potion Shop. The amount that came from their own in-house Alchemists was almost insignificant. Even though they were putting in all their effort, nurturing an Alchemist was an extremely costly and time-consuming affair. Moreover, many Alchemists lacked talent and often ended up using enormous amount of resources without showing any results.

"I'd like a few batches of Cure Charm Potions. It requires an Intermediate Alchemist to manufacture. I've heard the Starry Night Potion Shop already has two Alchemists at that rank," Sleepy Fox said.

"Cure Charm Potions? Are you guys preparing to clear the Succubus Den?" Nie Yan narrowed his eyes. Holy Empire was quite ambitious.

Chapter 154 – Dispute

The Succubus Den was a large Level 15 map. The administrator of Calore had issued a large-scale guild quest to investigate this place in search of “The Amnesiac’s Brain.” Generally, 2,000 Level 15 players was the recommended number to attempt this quest, but with great difficulty also came great rewards as the guild’s grade would be promoted upon completion. If Holy Empire became a Grade 2 guild, their status in Calore would increase, and even more guild quests would become available to them in the future. Furthermore, they would also attract more expert players to their ranks, allowing their strength to rise to another level.

Holy Empire was constantly suppressed by Victorious Return, but if they were able to complete this quest, they would leap over them and take the position of top dog in Calore which they could then attempt to gradually consolidate.

However, all of this was only possible under the assumption that they were able to amass enough Cure Charm Potions.

A trip to the Succubus Den needed at least thirty bottles, but naturally, since that was only the minimum requirement, a guild would generally prepare a little more. The Cure Charm Potion Recipe was an Intermediate Alchemy Recipe. Even when working together, it would take two Intermediate Alchemists at least an entire day to concoct that many potions.

Since Intermediate Alchemists were such a scarce resource at the current stage of the game, Sleepy Fox could only turn to Nie Yan for help.

Him not hesitating to save Nie Yan and risk a potential falling out with Victorious Return was also potentially due to this reason.

As Holy Empire's guild leader, Sleepy Fox would always act based on the guild's interests. If it didn't benefit the guild, then he absolutely wouldn't do it!

"Do you have a Cure Charm Potion Recipe?" Nie Yan asked. If Sleepy Fox didn't even have the recipe, then he was powerless to help.

"We have two Cure Charm Potion Recipes, and we can also provide the ingredients required to concoct the potions. I'd like to request a batch of fifty potions. Afterward, we can pay you 3 gold in labour fees," Sleepy Fox replied. The price he offered was fairly generous, an indication of just how important this quest was to him. After the batch of potions was ready and their other preparations were completed, they should also have enough players at the right level to attempt this quest.

Nie Yan gave it some thought. If it was like this, then his two Intermediate Alchemists would make quite a killing. With recipes and ingredients already provided for, they'd get to improve their proficiency in Alchemy while also receiving a cut of the 3 gold in commision. This was already quite generous. At the same time, him helping Holy Empire was basically the same as helping himself because when Holy Empire toppled Victorious Return, the latter would definitely focus all their energy on taking back their position. In this way, Asskickers United could freely expand their own influence.

Nie Yan stood in silence, pondering over the matter. While facing him on the other side, Sleepy Fox actually believed he was contacting the Starry Night Potion Shop.

“Then the deal is set. Just send the recipes, ingredients, and whatever else to the Starry Night Potion Shop,” Nie Yan finally said to Sleepy Fox.

With the deal being finalized, Sleepy Fox couldn't help but feel a little excited. After all, the project he had been planning for so long could finally start being carried out. He faced Nie Yan and said, “Then our next step is seeing you guys off. You all have red names, so you can't return to town, and this area is filled with Victorious Return players. So if you guys try to leave by yourselves, you'll definitely get surrounded again.”

“Alright, then we'll be troubling you guys.”

“While you guys are hunting mobs in the wilderness to clear your red names, message me if you need any supplies. I'll immediately send a person over to your coordinates,” Sleepy Fox said. All in all, he was being quite considerate.

Nie Yan and Sleepy Fox had to consider their own interests above all else, so it was unavoidable that they also schemed against each other. Perhaps if the both had some free time and were free of their commitments, then they could become good friends in private.

Nie Yan turned around and called Tang Yao and the others over, “We’re leaving. Let’s get rid of our red names first, then think about what we’ll do after.”

Guo Huai and the other survivors would be returning to the city first. Guo Huai walked up to Nie Yan and said with a mysterious smile, “There’ll be a nice surprise waiting for you guys tomorrow.”

Nie Yan also specifically instructed Guo Huai that the over two hundred players that had come to rescue him and Tang Yao, regardless of their intentions, whether it be loyalty or for their own benefit, would be given ample rewards. This would let all the members of their guild know that as long as they exerted themselves for the guild, the guild would generously reward them for their efforts. He had Tang Yao give all of the reinforcements 50 merit points each. For those that reached Level 10, they could even earn an additional 100 merit points.

The players had already done the calculations. In Asskickers United, 50 merit points was the equivalent of 2 and a half silver. This was already quite an amazing reward. 2 and a half silver could purchase several pieces of first-rate Bronze-grade equipment. It could even purchase one or two pieces of slightly inferior Silver-grade equipment. For the average Level 7–8 player, if they tallied up all their money, it would already be amazing for them to come up with 1 or 2 silver, considering many of them were usually in debt. Of course, 50 merit points wasn’t the only reward. Guo Huai had already recorded down the names of all the players that participated in the rescue mission. In the future, when the guild was giving out benefits, they would be the lucky ones to receive additional rewards.

Those that had died in the battle all received a message that the guild leader, Young Sparrow Hawk, had rewarded them with 50 Guild Contribution Points. And when they glimpsed at the level leaderboard, they noticed Tang Yao was still at the very top of the standings, leaving all of them stunned as to how he managed to stay alive through the seemingly fatal entrapment. This feat only built on their existing admiration of Tang Yao, which was further intensified when they recalled him gibbing Victorious Return players each time he fired off a spell. It was simply amazing.

As the players passed down their recollections of the event to each other, they practically elevated Tang Yao to the status of a god. At the same time, among the ones that didn't go, upon hearing the stories and seeing the 50 merit points that were given as a reward, they couldn't help but feel a sense of regret. To those many Level 7–8 players, even if they died and dropped a level and a piece of equipment, they would probably only be losing about 1 silver at most.

Currently, some players had already accumulated enough contribution and took out Silver-grade equipment from the guild treasury to wear. The vast majority of players were wearing White-grade equipment, having Bronze-grade equipment was decent, and owning even a single piece of Silver-grade equipment was enough to make many players endlessly envious.

Under Guo Huai and Hao Cheng's leadership, their clash with Victorious Return didn't have too much of a negative influence on their guild members. Add on the fact that Tang Yao didn't die, still holding firmly onto the number one spot on the leaderboards, many of the members were actually in admiration of them. Against three hundred Victorious Return elites, they were able to wipe out

nearly all of the enemies and still manage to escape unscathed from the battlefield. Tang Yao was practically a god! Earlier, the players joining the guild were mostly lower levelled, but now, some of the high-level players were also starting to apply. They were flocking over after hearing of Tang Yao's feats.

Guo Huai had also already edited together all the videos from different perspectives of Tang Yao recklessly massacring the players of Victorious Return, and then, he shared it on the official forums. Thanks to this, many eye-catching titles popped up such as: "Killing a Hundred Players, Featuring God Sparrow Hawk!", "1 vs. 100, God Sparrow Hawk Still Didn't Lose!", "Asskickers United and Victorious Return's Elites Battle!", and so on. Very rapidly, it garnered a ton of player interest. Probably by tomorrow, the forum moderators would be overwhelmed by the flood of discussions. This video basically pushed Tang Yao's popularity to an all new peak. It could even be said that it had helped Asskickers United as a whole to become even more famous.

Since they had already been targeted by Victorious Return, Asskickers United could no longer sit idly by and continue slowly developing on the sidelines. Otherwise, they would inevitably end up crushed by their enemy. So they needed to implement an extreme method to give them a huge boost in their expansion!

Just when Sleepy Fox and his troops were about to escort Nie Yan, Tang Yao, and the others away, a player who had been placed on look-out duty suddenly sent a message,「Boss, I've spotted a massive group of Victorious Return players coming from the east.」

「How many are there?」Sleepy Fox asked while furrowing his

brows.

「At least five thousand.」

“Did something happen?” Nie Yan asked after seeing Sleepy Fox’s grave expression.

“Another group of Victorious Return players are marching over here. They really do seem to think highly of you. They’ve brought at least five thousand members this time,” Sleepy Fox glanced at Nie Yan and replied. He felt a bit puzzled. Just what could Nie Yan and Tang Yao have done for Victorious Return to go to such lengths?

As Sleepy Fox brooded over this question, he suddenly figured it out, and his expression instantly turned into a sneer. With how the situation had developed so far, Heaven Breaker probably wasn’t merely leading these five thousand troops to take care of Nie Yan and Tang Yao, it was also for the sake of teaching him a lesson!

“Five thousand players? That’s going to be a little tough to handle. You guys only have around six hundred,” Nie Yan said with a faint smile.

“We only landed in this difficult situation because we came here to save you. Yet here you are gloating over our misfortune.”

“Well, with so many Victorious Return players appearing, I’m afraid this time they aren’t here to simply deal with Young

Sparrow Hawk and I.”

“You know, it really is unpleasant sometimes, chatting with someone who’s too smart for their own good,” Sleepy Fox replied with a wry smile.

“So, what are you planning to do about this?”

If Sleepy Fox handed them over now, then Holy Empire’s reputation would suffer a huge blow. Whether it was for the sake of preserving face or their future cooperation, he definitely had to protect Nie Yan and Tang Yao!

“Ying Gangbai, call for reinforcements!” Sleepy Fox then sent a message through the guild chat, calling for all members Level 10 and higher to come to Black Flame Forest near Tanbeto Town.

In Solanto Ravine, a group of over thirty Level 10–11 players were in the middle of grinding mobs when they suddenly received the order to mobilize from Sleepy Fox.

“The Boss is about to battle Victorious Return. Wrap everything up, we’re going!”

“Damn, it’s those Victorious Return bastards!”

“The Boss is finally going to teach those brats from Victorious Return a lesson. Let’s massacre them till they need barrels and suspenders to get around!”

None of the players in the group voiced any objections. They all retrieved their Return Scrolls, and after teleporting back to the city, they hurried through the transfer point to Tanbeto Town.

Violetdream Forest, Gloom Gull, Vast Prairie, Holy Empire members from everywhere, after receiving Sleepy Fox's call to arms, immediately took out their Return Scrolls and returned to the city. Seemingly all of them were heading in the same destination as more and more emerged out of Tanbeto Town's transfer point, causing the whole area to be crowded with Holy Empire players. The number of players gathered here didn't merely amount to five thousand. Sleepy Fox wasn't willing to back down and look weaker, so he had called over even more players than Heaven Breaker had!

“What's going on? Why are there so many Holy Empire players gathering at Tanbeto Town?”

“Apparently, Victorious Return and Holy Empire are having a dispute. Heaven Breaker brought a large group of players to surround Sleepy Fox. In response, Sleepy Fox summoned almost all of Holy Empire's main force. This time a good show is about to play out!”

Victorious Return was the top dog in Calore while Holy Empire was right behind them. If both sides had a frontal clash, the outcome would truly be hard to predict.

Chapter 155 – Ceasefire

A lot of unnecessary conflict could be avoided if Holy Empire were able to simply escort Nie Yan and Tang Yao out of the map, lest their presence be the fuse to ignite a feud with Victorious Return, but that just wasn't possible with so many enemy scouts lurking around. It was quite likely that as soon as they attempted to bring the pair out, they'd be intercepted mid-way since their bright red names made them too conspicuous in this barren, rocky landscape.

“Boss, we've collected over 80 pieces of equipment. Most of them are pretty good quality,” a Holy Empire player approached Sleepy Fox and informed. There should've been 300 pieces dropped, but he figured the Victorious Return players had managed to recover quite a few, hence why only 80 or so pieces remained.

In fact, there had actually been more equipment with even better properties left on the ground, but they were all collected by Guo Huai and the others. Shortly after their group returned to Calore, Nie Yan had received a system message that Guo Huai had deposited 30 or so pieces of equipment into the guild treasury. They had acted covertly, so the players from Holy Empire were probably wholly unaware.

After a moment of silence, Sleepy Fox looked to Nie Yan and asked, “How do you think we should handle these drops?” This equipment, all of which had once belonged to Victorious Return's elites, was akin to a big slab of tantalizing, juicy meat. A pity that his guild hadn't done enough to justify taking it all for themselves, since Holy Empire only arrived in time to finish off the stragglers which amounted to about ten percent of Victorious Return's total

force. Of course, his guild could simply choose to swallow everything, but when all was said and done, they'd still be slighting the other party, an act that could damage the cooperation of both sides down the line. Unable to come to a decision, Sleepy Fox threw the ball in Nie Yan's court.

“Let's take half each. We'll divide it up according to properties. A portion of the equipment came from my team members, so I have to do my best to help them get it back,” Nie Yan replied. If Holy Empire received the short end of the stick, then Sleepy Fox probably wouldn't be satisfied. After all, he had saved their lives. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the equipment was indeed obtained through their efforts, so if it was divided up evenly, Sleepy Fox wouldn't have any grounds to object, and that was ignoring the almost certain possibility that he had taken advantage of the situation to fill his own pockets first. As for whether they truly did only find 80 pieces of equipment lying on the ground, Nie Yan had no way of knowing.

Sleepy Fox nodded his head and said, “Then, we'll do as you suggested.” After which, he had his subordinate hand over 40 pieces of equipment to Nie Yan.

Dividing equipment was the easiest time for disputes to arise. Fortunately, Nie Yan and Sleepy Fox were players who didn't lack money. The former was the owner of the Starry Night Potion Shop while the latter was the guild leader of a major guild. Neither of them could be bothered to fuss over a few pieces of equipment.

Nie Yan planned to pad the guild treasury with this equipment. It required constant investment for them to truly succeed. Take, for

example, a major guild like Holy Empire, their treasury was still far from being enough even after putting at least 100 gold into it. He still had a long road ahead of him since Asskickers United's treasury had only recently started being built up.

“Heaven Breaker won't do anything too rash,” Sleepy Fox said after thinking for a bit. Both guilds would come into conflict sooner or later, but it was still too early right now. If they did clash, it would only end up benefiting others.

Soon, the five thousand troops from Victorious Return arrived. The dense crowd of players headed by their guild leader, Heaven Breaker, formed a crescent formation, then gradually began surrounding Sleepy Fox's group.

Tang Yao stared in shock as this vast crowd closed in on them, appearing as if they could topple mountains and overturn the seas. Now this was truly a guild. When thousands of players gathered together, just how much power would they be able to burst out with? He suddenly recalled Nie Yan's previous words. A single player really was insignificant in the face of a guild!

“Nie Yan, tell me, will our guild be like them in the future, gathering tens of thousands of players with just a single call?” Tang Yao's eyes flashed with a strange light.

“Definitely, sooner or later, there'll be a day when we're even more powerful than them,” Nie Yan seriously replied.

“When that day comes, I'll be able to step on whoever I want to!

If an eyesore appears, I can just call over ten thousand little brothers to directly crush them! Then, we'll see if they still dare to act arrogant again."

"... You really need to grow up a little." Nie Yan was momentarily left speechless before breaking into laughter.

"Heaven Breaker, I trust you've been well since we last met," Sleepy Fox greeted with a smile, acting as if the tension between the two groups didn't exist.

On the other hand, Heaven Breaker was in no mood to engage in idle banter with Sleepy Fox. He swept his gaze over Holy Empire's ranks and spotted Nie Yan and Tang Yao among them, then said in a cold voice, "Those two killed too many of my subordinates. Hand them over, and there'll be no trouble. If not, I don't mind getting into a full-blown guild war with you."

Sleepy Fox still wore a smiling expression, but his eyes flashed with an almost undetectable glimmer.

"Sorry, but no. They're under my protection. So I won't be handing them over. Heaven Breaker, you're welcome to do whatever you like. Just know that my Holy Empire isn't afraid of going to war with you. Even though we aren't as big as Victorious Return, we're not so easily trifled with," Sleepy Fox replied with a calm smile.

Heaven Breaker felt puzzled. Was Sleepy Fox actually going out of his way to protect Nie Yan and Tang Yao? It seemed this matter

wasn't simply about face. Just what did those two have that would even move him?

If they belonged to Holy Empire, then that would explain things, but clearly they didn't.

“Boss, forget it! Let's just get rid of them! Who cares about Sleepy Fox?”

“We'll slaughter all of them!”

The Victorious Return players behind Heaven Breaker began clamoring and making outbursts. Due to their superior numbers, their self-confidence swelled like a balloon. Only a few Victorious Return players, who were more level-headed, understood that even though the other side merely had around five hundred players, they were all Holy Empire's elites. Wiping them all out in a short period of time would be too difficult, and their reinforcements were definitely rushing over.

Heaven Breaker also understood the consequences of starting an all out war with Holy Empire. His main purpose for coming here was to intimidate and force them to hand over Nie Yan and Tang Yao. An added benefit was that he'd also get to trample Holy Empire's honour and show them who the real top dog was around Calore.

“I told you... I only want those two, and the rest of you are free to go. Right now, there's still time to change your mind before you regret it,” Heaven Breaker threatened.

As soon as Heaven Breaker gave the signal, the five thousand troops began gradually closing in on Sleepy Fox and his group. All of a sudden, the atmosphere became extremely hostile.

Sleepy Fox calmly ordered his subordinates to get into a defensive formation. If a fight really broke out, they would be able to hold out at least until reinforcements arrive. As a few Victorious Return players entered the attack range of the Holy Empire casters, the smell of gunpowder rapidly disseminated through the air.

However, neither side had taken the initiative to attack.

They were all waiting for their respective guild leaders to give out their commands. As soon as either group attacked, a chaotic battle of a rarely-seen scale would occur.

“Are they really going to start a fight?” Tang Yao asked.

“Right now it’s still too hard to tell,” Nie Yan replied. He knew Victorious Return was simply putting up a bold front in the hopes of intimidating Sleepy Fox to hand him and Tang Yao over. He didn’t believe Heaven Breaker would rashly start a war with Holy Empire, but the human mind was hard to anticipate.

“I’m giving you this final warning. Hand those two over, and I can let everything pass.” Heaven Breaker’s expression was dark. His eyes were sharp like a hawk’s, and he emitted an icy, murderous aura.

Sleepy Fox faintly smiled, then said, "That won't be possible. Holy Empire is a guild of honour. We'll never abandon our friends."

"Since it's like so, don't blame me for what happens next." Heaven Breaker gave the signal to attack. Immediately, Victorious Return's troops began to act. Leading the vanguard were Warriors in full sets of battle armour. Formed in a line, they encroached on Holy Empire's players.

A conflict was about to occur at any time.

Nie Yan saw the determined look in Heaven Breaker's eyes. If he were to retreat now after giving all those threats, then it would be tantamount to slapping himself in the face. Who knows, a prideful man like him might not back down.

"If a fight really does break out, then we won't be able to guard you, so you guys will have to fend for yourselves. If you find an opportunity to escape, then take it. If not, help us kill as many of them as possible," Sleepy Fox said to Nie Yan and Tang Yao.

"Don't worry about us," Nie Yan replied with a light smile. Today he would kill to his heart's content. Even if his name became a little redder, what did it matter to him?

Five thousand versus five hundred, Sleepy Fox's group was outnumbered ten to one, so they were feeling a lot of pressure.

Just as everyone thought the fight was about to start, a player rushed to Heaven Breaker's side and whispered into his ear. "Boss, Holy Empire's reinforcements are approaching fast."

"How many are there?" Heaven Breaker asked with furrowed brows.

"We're not too sure at the moment, but they shouldn't be any smaller than us."

Heaven Breaker never expected them to be so quick. Sleepy Fox had managed to mobilize all of Holy Empire's members, who were out levelling in different places, here in such a short period of time. If he were to call the rest of his players to this battle, then this conflict would evolve into a full-scale guild war.

A company of a hundred Holy Empire players came rushing over from behind Victorious Return's troops. The player leading the group shouted toward Sleepy Fox, "Guild Leader, we've arrived!"

Subsequently, more and more Holy Empire players emerged. Some groups were only several dozen players in size while others were several hundred.

"Boss, we made it in time!"

"Our other brothers are about to arrive here soon too!"

“Good!” Sleepy Fox nodded. His troops had actually arrived in quite a timely manner.

As more players arrived to merge into Sleepy Fox’s troops, his ranks rapidly expanded. Soon, their numbers broke through to a thousand, two thousand, three thousand, and so forth.

“Hey, Fox, been a while. You seem to have stirred up quite some trouble.” A youth wearing the Iron Storm Set approached Sleepy Fox with a smile. Shockingly, Nie Yan had met this very same player in Hilderlocke before.

“I’ve really poked the hornet’s nest this time around. I suppose I won’t be having it easy these coming days,” Sleepy Fox replied with a bitter smile. Then, he looked to the player and asked, “So, Kill Love, what made you decide to spend so much money to come all the way to Calore?” As fellow owners who ran gaming orgs, they were at least somewhat friendly with each other in private.

“I’m in Calore to do a quest. I heard things were quite lively over on your side, so I came here to take a look.” As Kill Love happened to spot Nie Yan standing beside Sleepy Fox, a look of astonishment spread across his face, and he blurted, “It’s you...?”

“Huh? Do you two know each other?” Sleepy Fox asked in surprise.

“We happened to encounter each other in Hilderlocke.” Kill Love smiled mysteriously, declining to explain in detail the exact circumstances of their meeting.

Sleepy Fox glanced at Nie Yan, then turned back to Kill Love with a pensive look on his face.

Chapter 156 – Sapphire Shrine

Nie Yan didn't expect Kill Love to appear here. Was it possible that Holy Empire and Battle Crazy Alliance were working together? As he searched through his memories, he recalled that Victorious Return, Radiant Sacred Flame, and the rest of Cao Xu's guilds did indeed clash with Battle Crazy Alliance, Holy Empire, and other guilds on numerous occasions. While facing the pressure of their superior might, it was quite feasible for Battle Crazy Alliance and Holy Empire to have forged a secret alliance. Honestly, he hadn't acquired much knowledge regarding these matters in his past life. Back then, he was simply a player who minded his own business. Even during the War God Tribe's most flourishing period, he was merely enjoying the life of a young master and had never once even so much as thought of leading his father's guild to contend for rule over the empire.

He was suddenly snapped out of his daydreaming when a fifty-something-year-old man in white robes strolled toward Sleepy Fox and Kill Love. If not for the fact that they were nowhere near a town or city, and that he was dressed like a player, some people might even mistake him for an NPC.

His cheeks were somewhat thin and dry, almost sunken in like a skeleton's, but his expression was lively as he radiated a healthy glow. Overall, he perfectly suited the description of a kindly old man.

Nie Yan had a vague impression of this person. If he wasn't wrong, then he should be the guild leader of Sapphire Shrine. Although not as large as Holy Empire or Victorious Return, Sapphire Shrine was still a well-known guild, and their combat

strength wasn't lagging that far behind them. In the previous timeline, Sapphire Shrine, which primarily focused on nurturing Mages, had produced three Magisters among their ranks. One had to know, during a conflict even a single Magister was a strategic resource. Having three represented a force that could intimidate any other power. Therefore, even when Victorious Return was at the peak of their influence, they still didn't dare to rashly declare war against Sapphire Shrine, and the origin for this lay in their Magisters that possessed the power to heavily influence the outcome of a battle.

He seemed to remember this old man's name as well. If he recalled correctly, it was Fa Lan (Blue Mage). In spite of his old age, it would be a grave mistake to underestimate him. In his past life, this old man had managed to advance into a Great Mage, becoming a formidable player to be reckoned.

"You came as well?" Sleepy Fox asked. Agewise, Fa Lan was old enough to be in his father's generation, so proper manners dictated that he ought to address him as senior. However, seeing as both of them led a major guild, making them equals, he wasn't willing to lower his standing. As such, this was a source of endless headache for him. Why was a man in his fifties so insistent on mingling with youths several decades younger than him? What a crazy old coot!

"Oh, don't mind little old me. I'm just passing by." Fa Lan chuckled, then said, "What? Am I not welcome here? You should be thanking me. If I didn't come, Holy Empire and Victorious Return would have really fought today."

Sleepy Fox thought for a bit before coming to a realization.

Sapphire Shrine was also a formidable entity. So long as Fa Lan was present here, Victorious Return probably wouldn't dare to take any action. If that was the case, then naturally, no battle would occur.

“Why are you helping me? If Holy Empire and Victorious Return go at it, then wouldn't Sapphire Shrine benefit from the fallout?”

“Nonsense, if you guys really went at it, then Radiant Sacred Flame will also step into the fray. At that point, you're guaranteed to get the worse of it,” Fa Lan replied. There was an old saying, “United we stand, divided we fall.” He wasn't just being considerate, he was also thinking of what's best for his own guild.

“Is your information reliable?” Sleepy Fox asked in shock. Did Victorious Return really form an alliance with Radiant Sacred Flame? How is this possible? When did this happen? Several questions ran through his mind. Why was Victorious Return always so overbearing to the extent that they seemed to be willing to go to war with anyone...? He finally came to the conclusion. It was precisely because they had the support of Radiant Sacred Flame!

“If the information was unreliable, do you think this old man would still bother coming here?”

Even Nie Yan showed a hint of surprise. He hadn't expected Victorious Return and Radiant Sacred Flame to already be cooperating so early on.

Sleepy Fox was quite alarmed after listening to Fa Lan's words. If Radiant Sacred Flame truly intervened in this conflict, then the situation would turn more serious than he initially thought.

At this time, Nie Yan spotted yet another acquaintance walking toward them. It was Splendid Star.

"How's it going, Fox? Do you need a hand?" Splendid Star asked. After the incident with the Guardian of Order, he had already become rather familiar with Sleepy Fox. He was a person who valued loyalty and didn't fear danger which was why he came here to support him.

In the previous timeline, these people were figures that could topple mountains and overturn the seas. Who would think they'd all gather here in the same place today? This was truly an unprecedented event.

As they witnessed Holy Empire's forces growing ever larger, the Victorious Return players anxiously awaited Heaven Breaker's orders. However, their guild leader was focused on the several players chatting by Sleepy Fox's side. Although he wasn't too familiar with them, he had still encountered them several times in the past. Then, he finally recognized their faces: the guild leader of Sapphire Shrine, Fa Lan; the guild leader of Battle Crazy Alliance, Kill Love; and lastly, the guild leader of Splendid Temple, Splendid Star. It seemed he had underestimated Sleepy Fox's capabilities.

Battle Crazy Alliance's forces weren't based in Calore, so he could safely ignore them. Sapphire Shrine, however, wasn't an existence he could simply overlook.

“Guild Leader, we should attack.”

“I agree. Guild Leader, they’ll have even more reinforcements rushing over soon. Should we also call more of our guys over?”

Heaven Breaker shook his head before saying in a gloomy tone, “We’re withdrawing!”

“P-pulling back? Why?”

“What!? Guild Leader, why are we retreating?”

When Heaven Breaker swept his gaze over his dissatisfied guild members, they immediately shut up. His orders were absolute. Once he decided on something, no one could disobey.

Victorious Return’s troops gradually retreated, and under Sleepy Fox’s instructions, Holy Empire didn’t try to pursue them. Due to Fa Lan’s presence, an explosive standoff that was about to erupt into violence at any moment dissolved without a trace.

“I’ll assign some people to escort you guys out of here,” Sleepy Fox said after turning back to Nie Yan, Tang Yao, and Yao Yao.

“Sure, sorry for the trouble.” Nie Yan nodded his head. With their safe exit, the pressure on Sleepy Fox would lessen significantly.

Just to be on the cautious side, Sleepy Fox ordered his subordinates to bring over two hundred black garbs from Calore that could hide their appearance. After having Nie Yan and his group, as well as a portion of his own troops, wear the garbs, he divided them into several dozen groups and made each one set out in different directions.

And so, two hundred players enshrouded in black garbs scattered in every direction.

“Fox, why did you insist on saving them?” gazing at the backs of their fading silhouettes, Kill Love asked in a doubtful tone.

“I made a deal with them,” Sleepy Fox answered briskly. “Now, tell me how exactly you and Nirvana Flame met. What was he doing in Hilderlocke? Don’t tell me he was there to do a quest too.”

“I met him there at the administrator’s office. Just moments before, he managed to snag away the best plot of land in the city,” Kill Love replied in a dejected tone. He had been eyeing that property for quite awhile.

“He went to Hilderlocke to purchase property? But, why...? It doesn’t make sense. Aside from the properties in the eastern district, with all of them already being bought up because they were relatively cheap, the western and southern parts of the city still have quite a few places open for sale. There’s no reason for him to waste so much money to go all the way to Hilderlocke just to purchase a single property. With just the 2 gold he spent on the

round trip alone, he'd be able to buy a small plot in Calore, even if the location is slightly unfavourable."

"Not necessarily, I can guarantee you the properties in Calore won't be as valuable as the properties in Hilderlocke in the future. How many plots are listed for purchase in Calore? Adding them all together, Hilderlocke only has about a dozen or so," Kill Love rebuked. From his perspective, if Nie Yan's sense for real-estate was anything like his own, then the properties he purchased would absolutely spike in value in the coming months.

With Conviction's real-world currency exchange slowly approaching, snagging up plots of land became an increasing concern for many guilds. However, setting up the treasury and the expenses needed just to keep the guild running on a day-to-day basis left many guild leaders with almost nothing to spare. Even if they could scrape up enough gold to buy some land, they wouldn't be able to acquire much. Take Holy Empire for example, in the last few days they bought up six plots in Calore, but all of them were relatively cheap and in unfavourable locations. On the other hand, Victorious Return was slightly better off as they had managed to snatch up the largest piece of land in the southern district for over 30 gold. At the same time, the eastern district had also become a hotly-eyed area as of late due to the Starry Night Potion Shop's popularity. However, by the time many guild leaders had arrived at the administrator's office, they discovered all of the plots there had already been mysteriously sold. Such a strange matter left them all bewildered.

Yet Nie Yan actually had enough money to burn to run off all the way to Hilderlocke to purchase properties. Whatever entity was backing him, their financial resources were truly astonishing.

Sleepy Fox pondered for a moment. All signs pointed to the Starry Night Potion Shop. From his estimates, it probably made at least 20 gold or more a day. Even for the major guilds, such an income would leave them far behind with no hope of competing. In Calore, only this entity had enough financial capital to be eating up land all over the place. Could Nie Yan really be the owner of this shop? Thinking back to what he knew of Nie Yan's tendencies, the notion didn't seem all that farfetched. He always acted in a very low-key manner. Even when he was high enough to place at the front of the leaderboards, he still chose to maintain his anonymity. As for his background that was shrouded in mystery, still no one had uncovered what it was. He really could be the owner of the Starry Night Potion Shop!

With this realization, Sleepy Fox felt a chill run down his back. If Nie Yan was the owner of the Starry Night Potion Shop, then just how much capital did he control? Perhaps the number of plots he already owned far outstripped that of any major guild's. It seemed from now on, not only did he have to work together with Nie Yan, it was also best that he deepened their relations! Because from Sleepy Fox's point of view, he was really too deep and unfathomable.

With Victorious Return's forces retreating, after receiving Sleepy Fox's commands, Holy Empire's troops also scattered. They all felt a deep sense of regret that they didn't get to battle, but they were merely ordinary members, unaware of the implications of such a conflict. If they had really clashed, then a huge calamity would have befallen their guild.

Nie Yan, Tang Yao, and Yao Yao along with a group of escorts

arrived just outside of the entrance of some woods. It was a Level 13 monster zone, making it impossible for Victorious Return to mobilize a large force to pursue them. So, now, they were finally safe.

“You guys can go back now. Thanks again,” Nie Yan said to the few Holy Empire players that had escorted them here.

“No need for thanks. You’re our guild leader’s friend, so it’s only natural that we spare no effort,” the Holy Empire players replied.

Looking at the expressions in their eyes, Nie Yan could tell that they all held immense respect for Sleepy Fox.

After saying their goodbyes, the Holy Empire players teleported away with Return Scrolls.

“Nie Yan, where are we going now?” Yao Yao asked. They weren’t safe hunting mobs in low-level zones because it would be fairly easy for others to spot them. Thus, they could only head to high-level zones, but hunting high-level monsters also held its own risks.

“We’ll grind on high-level mobs to get rid of our red names, but wait a bit first... I’m going to have a few things brought over to us,” Nie Yan answered after thinking for a moment.

Chapter 157 – Heaven-Acclaimed Genius

Nie Yan informed Guo Huai that he had his eye set on some of the equipment dropped by the elites of Victorious Return, a few of which were even better than his own. They were all Sosil Valley and Medusa's Lair-quality. Aside from the Thief equipment for himself, there also happened to be some Arcane Mage and Holy Mage gear that were perfectly suited for Tang Yao and Yao Yao to equip. With their gear improved, hunting monsters would become much more efficient. At the same time, he also had a few things that he wanted to send back to make space in his bag.

The best items on him were his accessories and special items which couldn't be found on the marketplace. However, as for his more replaceable pieces of equipment such as gloves, shoulderguards, and so on, they were actually inferior to the gear of the elites from Victorious Return.

「The Starry Night Potion Shop should've already produced a couple Intermediate Health and Mana Potions by now. Find someone to retrieve some, then assign a trustworthy person to deliver them here, preferably a Thief.」Nie Yan instructed Guo Huai. A Thief was most suited for the role of a courier; plus, they were fast as well.

「Alright, just tell me your coordinates. I'll send someone from the guild to deliver the things you want.」

「Here's my coordinates: 38528.59683.」

「Good, they'll be coming over with your stuff soon. The player I'm sending is named Sun, so be wary if anyone else approaches you. Besides that, don't stay in one place for too long; otherwise, you guys might be spotted by Victorious Return's scouts,」Guo Huai replied. He was quite concerned about Nie Yan and Tang Yao's safety. After all, if something bad happened to them, then their fledgling guild wouldn't be able to bear the loss.

「Wait, right before the part about staying in the same place for too long, what did you say?」Nie Yan asked in shock.

「I'm sending Sun over to deliver the items to you. Also, I want you guys to be careful and not get spotted. Why, what's up?」

「Tell me again. Are you sure that that player is named Sun?」

「Yeah, I'm sure. He joined our guild right after we were established. If it's a question about how reliable he is, he has the highest contribution out of all our members with 600 merit points. He's also only fifteen years old, and he told me that he's a big fan of Tang Yao and really wants to meet him. The kid really worships him for being able to hunt Level 30 mobs. More importantly, he's pretty skilled too. He was originally Level 10, but he dropped down to Level 7 after volunteering on our mission to save you guys. What's more, he was actually able to take out three Victorious Return elites with him before dying. I definitely think he's worth nurturing. Why, is there something wrong?」Guo Huai asked in a puzzled tone. Sun was only a fifteen-year-old boy, still naive and innocent. It was unlikely that he was the spy of some other guild, especially considering how much he had already sacrificed to save their guild leader.

「No, there's nothing wrong. You're fine sending him over,」Nie Yan answered after finally calming down. He wasn't sure whether this was the same brilliant player he knew of from his past life. As a legendary Shadow Dancer and three-time consecutive arena champion, Sun was praised as a genius Thief. After pondering a bit more, the timing did seem about right; Sun's age should only be around fifteen at the time of Conviction's release. Nevertheless, such a young boy would display astonishing talent a few months down the line. Many videos of his PvP battles would surface on the official website. After which they would lay the groundwork for dueling as a Thief, becoming recommended learning material, a digital canon of sorts, for anyone who wished to play the class. In fact, Nie Yan himself had learned many of his basics through watching them. Yet right now, Guo Huai was telling him that this legendary figure was actually a little brother of their guild who would be delivering the things he requested in just a moment. A heaven-acclaimed genius being reduced to the role of a mere porter, this was just too inconceivable...

He never expected Sun to join their guild. Thankfully, he was quickly noticed by Guo Huai because of his excellent performance during the rescue mission.

There was a saying that went something like: "A true gem would shine wherever it went." Who knew that this gem would fall right into his pocket.

Sun was merely a fifteen-year-old boy right now, seemingly ordinary at a glance, but sometimes... talent was an inherent trait that would naturally manifest itself regardless of how circumstances changed. Sun was precisely that kind of person.

There was no lack of young geniuses that could make even the most experienced of experts marvel at their skills. They were heaven's darlings: an eighteen-year-old Magister, a nineteen-year-old Guardian Paladin, and of course, the Shadow Dancer, Sun... Many such geniuses had left their tracks in Conviction's ancient history books.

These extraordinary geniuses would grow into supreme existences that couldn't be overlooked by anyone. If he was able to secure Sun's loyalty, then it would become an absolute boon for their guild in the future.

As they awaited Sun's arrival, Nie Yan, Tang Yao, and Yao Yao hid themselves behind some bushes and began chatting to pass the time.

"I saw two pieces of equipment in the treasury that had Ignore Level +1. They're nowhere close to comparing to your Arcane Fairy, but they'll still be a little helpful. When we're hunting Scaled Frogs later on, I want you to put them on," Nie Yan said before suddenly having an idea. Should he get himself a set of Ignore Level gear in the future, specifically for grinding certain mobs?

In the later stages of the game when progression slowed down to a crawl, usually around Level 100 and onward, players would start to gather various pieces of equipment to create sets specifically for hunting mobs, dueling players, Fire Resistance, Lightning Resistance, and so forth.

“Mhmm...” Tang Yao simply nodded his head. He was still depressed after losing his Arcane Fairy, so for now, it was hard for him to return to his usual happy-go-lucky mood.

“Yao Yao, how are Yu Lan and the others doing right now?”

“Some of them ended up losing all their equipment. Most of them lost quite a few levels too, so they’re pretty depressed. They also wanted me to apologize on their behalf,” Yao Yao answered.

“Apologize? What for?” Nie Yan asked with a hint of surprise.

“When all’s said and done, we were the main cause for the incident. After all, the player who sold you out was still a member of our team. We’ve already kicked them by the way.”

“That still can’t be blamed on your entire team. That player was acting on their own devices,” Nie Yan replied with a faint chuckle. They were overthinking things too much. However, many players placed extreme importance on the reputation of their team. They were like a single entity, if a member gained glory, then the entire team would thrive. If a member fell from grace, then the entire team would take on the burden. “I’ve given your team 3000 merit points. If there’s anything they need in the guild treasury, then they can go ahead and take it.”

“Ah... thank you, Nie Yan,” Yao Yao said in a grateful tone. If it was like this, then Yu Lan and the others wouldn’t have to worry about finding new equipment. Training normally, they would be back to their previous levels in several days.

Nie Yan waved it off. Yu Lan's team was currently an important force within the guild. Only by treating them well would they have the desire to stay in the guild and return the kindness.

While chatting with Yao Yao, he was suddenly struck by a peculiar feeling.

There's a Thief!

His gaze scanned over the distant underbrush before going into stealth. His high awareness allowed him to quickly lock onto the opponent's position.

When the player's Awareness was equal to a rival Thief's Cloaking, they would be able to vaguely sense the Thief's approach. A relatively cautious player might even be able to guard against their sneak attack, but they would never be able to sense the Thief's location. If the player's Awareness was a bit higher than a rival Thief's Cloaking, then they would be able to vaguely sense which direction they were coming from. However, in the event that the player's Awareness vastly exceeded a rival Thief's Cloaking, then they would be able to pinpoint that Thief's exact location.

Nie Yan had already discovered the general area where the rival Thief was located, but he still wasn't quite able to see them clearly.

Eye of Truth!

His eyes suddenly emitted a mysterious glow as they turned bloodshot. Soon, an indistinct shadowy figure materialized in the nearby vegetation.

He slowly approached it, his silhouette completely hidden within the shadows.

The Thief seemed to be looking for something. He quietly circled behind them. The opponent's Awareness was far below his Cloaking, so they had no chance of discovering him unless he made an egregious mistake or purposefully revealed himself.

Nie Yan aimed a Smothering Strike at the back of that Thief's head.

That Thief's reaction was pretty quick. As soon as they sensed something was off, they attempted to roll to avoid the attack. However, Nie Yan's dagger resembled a viper as it pursued after them, and before they could even complete their roll animation, his Smothering Strike had already struck them in the back of the head and put them into a dazed state.

Knocking the rival Thief out of stealth with his attack, he circled back to the front to get a good look at their appearance. He found their face a little familiar. Actually, after watching so many videos of this person in the past, he was able to recognize them at a glance. This was Sun! Although he still looked a little young and immature, his facial features didn't differ much.

Nie Yan put away his dagger and waited for Sun to awake from his dazed state. When Sun finally did and discovered him, he raised his dagger and was about to attack.

“I’m Nirvana Flame,” Nie Yan abruptly introduced himself as he sized Sun up. He had a clean complexion, and his hair was cut pretty short. With just a single glance, anyone could tell he was still a young kid.

“Oh, so it was you, sir. Watchful Snail told me to deliver a couple pieces of equipment to you,” Sun replied with a somewhat reserved tone.

Many people would find it hard to believe that this somewhat shy and reserved kid, in the next seven to eight years, would actually grow up into a peerless Thief that countless players would look up to.

“Thank you,” Nie Yan said with a faint smile.

“Don’t mention it. Nirvana Flame, sir, your Smothering Strike just now was really too amazing! Can you teach me how you did that sometime?” Sun asked as he gazed at Nie Yan with a somewhat revering expression. Ever since he entered the game, Nie Yan was the only Thief that he had felt completely powerless against.

“My Awareness and Cloaking are pretty high. That’s why I was able to discover you and track you down.” Nie Yan laughed.

Sun shook his head, then said in a serious tone, “If it was simply you having higher Awareness and Cloaking, then I wouldn’t have been caught so completely off guard. It’s impossible for a Thief to fully conceal their presence while in stealth. We’re not gods. When you attacked me earlier, you were able to predict where I was going to escape to as soon as I moved and adjusted your aim accordingly. I feel that takes a lot of skill.”

When Nie Yan fought other players, he subconsciously employed a few of the positioning and attacking techniques from his past life. A Thief required finesse down to the smallest actions, but it was precisely these minute details that made it the hardest class to master. He didn’t know how many grueling hours he spent in order to master it. These PvP instincts had already long permeated into the marrow of his bones. After all, practice makes perfect. In the previous timeline, there were at least 30 Thieves on equal standing with him. However, to these new players in the present, he seemed completely unrivalled.

Nie Yan faintly noticed the same graceful bearing of the Thief he knew from his past life coming from Sun. It was precisely his astonishing observational ability and serious attitude that had allowed him to grow from his experiences in duelling other players and become a peerless talent.

He had an inkling of a feeling that Sun’s emergence might be an opportunity for him to improve. In his past life, he was only a step away from becoming a Shadow Dancer. In terms of skill, he had a hard time making even an inch of progress. Without being able to take that step, he was unable to cross the final barrier. However, Sun was a natural talent that could become a Shadow Dancer. Sooner or later, there would be a day when he would mature into

an unequalled Thief that everyone would admire. If he improved along with Sun, then he might be able to learn many more new things.

Chapter 158 – Master

For fear of others surpassing them, a person might try to stifle their peers out of jealousy. Such behaviour was foolish. If a person truly wished to make progress, then they must adopt the attitude of always striving to better themselves, just like Sun when he had released the videos of his duels to announce that he was seeking new opponents. He had endlessly challenged stronger people while stubbornly pursuing the goal of improving himself even further. Only then was he gradually acknowledged for his talent by the rest of the playerbase.

Even geniuses had to take a step at a time if they wished to reach the apex.

By exchanging pointers with Sun, Nie Yan might find the flaws in his own techniques while also learning many new ones and slowly progress.

Whatever the case, he definitely had to keep Sun in their guild, but at the same time, he also had to give him enough space to grow so that he could walk a similar path as his counterpart in the previous timeline.

There was one more point to consider. Beside being incredibly skilled in his past life, Sun also possessed unrivalled popularity to the extent that he could gather tens of thousands with just a single call. A simple wave of his hand was enough for Innumerable expert Thief players to rally to his cause. It was hard to imagine the benefits a guild would receive if a player like this were to emerge in their ranks.

Asskickers United would require the efforts of countless talents to forge its path to glory!

“Nirvana Flame, sir... please let me become your disciple and teach me how to play the Thief class,” after what seemed like half a day, Sun finally drummed up enough courage to ask as he looked at Nie Yan with an expression filled with hope. Compared to his current self, Nie Yan and Tang Yao’s levels were frighteningly high. Furthermore, he had been able to personally witness their prowess as they rampaged through the battlefield, slaying a foe every ten steps. To him, Nie Yan was practically a deity-like figure who was set up on a high pedestal and exceedingly far out of reach. Take, for example, today, when they exchanged blows for the first time, he had felt utterly powerless against him and was swiftly incapacitated. Taking all these points into consideration, it was quite clear why he wished to take Nie Yan on as his master. However, he felt somewhat nervous, and he was already mentally preparing himself for refusal. After all, why would such a lofty figure bother wasting their time on a nobody like him?

Nie Yan never thought Sun would make this kind of request. The unparalleled genius Thief in his past life wanted to make him their master... Honestly speaking, he couldn’t help but feel a little underqualified because, in his mind, it wasn’t him who was placed on the pedestal, no, it was the Sun in his memories who took that spot.

“I know this is a very big request, but I promise you that I’ll try my hardest. I definitely won’t tarnish your name! Master, please accept this lowly one as your disciple!” Sun stared at Nie Yan as he begged in a sincere tone.

Nie Yan saw an intense desire to learn coming from Sun's eyes as well as an unyielding resolve that welcomed any and all challenges. Aside from his natural talent, Sun also possessed an intrinsic quality about him that an ordinary person would find difficult to reach.

Was he worried that Sun would tarnish his reputation? Of course not! As he looked at Sun who still appeared visibly immature with his boyish looks, he recalled that Sun was actually said to be quite a sentimental person. In the previous timeline when his friend had been unjustly killed, he snuck into the offending guild's stronghold all by himself and murdered several dozen players before escaping unscathed. This event was also one of his many brilliant feats. Although gaining a genius' loyalty through material benefits was incredibly difficult, just like any other person, they were bound to their sentiments. It was very possible that he could start fostering a relationship with Sun right now. And in the future, if Sun really did come to recognize him as master, then that would be perfect.

But was he really qualified to be Sun's master?

At least within the next three years, it absolutely wouldn't pose a problem. After all, for a Thief to truly attain the level of a Great Thief or higher, apart from talent, they were also required to have perseverance and willpower that surpassed all others. Even a legendary player like Sun would require at least three years to reach that level. As for his own growth, now that would depend on his talent. Within the next three years, if he found more skilled experts to compare notes with, then it was unlikely that he would stagnate. Perhaps, with some difficulty, he would even be able to extend the time that he was superior to five or six years. After that,

if Sun really grew to an inhumane realm, then wasn't it only natural for a student to eventually surpass their master? However, if he was able to comprehend the essence of what it meant to be a Shadow Dancer, allowing him to maintain his superiority, then that would be the most ideal.

Sun felt anxious when Nie Yan didn't give an immediate reply.

"Master, please accept me as your disciple!" Sun begged once more.

"Accepting you isn't impossible... but I don't want you calling me Master. I'm not that much older than you. From now on, just call me Big Bro," Nie Yan answered with a light smile. Accepting Sun as his disciple... if anyone from his past life heard of this, they would be shocked out of their minds.

"Yes!" Sun exclaimed in joy. He still had the temperament of a child. Seeing him unable to hold back his excitement, Nie Yan couldn't help but break into a smile.

"Before we do anything, hand over the items I asked for first. Then, I want you to deliver a few things back to Watchful Snail, so he can deposit them in the treasury. Afterward, hurry back here. I plan to take you levelling with us," Nie Yan said. He could use this trip as a pretext to do some master-disciple bonding with Sun. At the same time, it also solved the problem of their group lacking a courier who could bring drops back to the city or deliver potions, pills, and whatever else they needed back to them. With how severe their PKer statuses were, he didn't know how long it would take for them to finally clear their red names... three or four days if

they were fast and probably twice as long for Tang Yao.

Previously, he had been awaiting the time when Adjudicator of God and Sacrificial Gambit would both be off cooldown so he could do the quest that required Steal. In fact, if things had gone according to plan, then he would've been able to set off the moment the servers reopened tomorrow. Unfortunately, after getting caught up in Heaven Breaker's trap, his plans had gone awry.

He had come to realize one of the small truths of life. Even if he was given a second chance at his past, no matter how perfectly he planned the road ahead, something outside his control would come along and mess it up. When that happened, he had no other choice but to rely on his own efforts as well as all that he had accumulated up to that point to keep moving step by step regardless of how much things went off course. Then, as long as he advanced with unwavering confidence, everything would eventually fall back into place.

“Big Bro, you're going to take me levelling with you? Awesome!” Sun jumped up in excitement. “Wait for me, I'll be back in no time!”

On the side of temperament, Nie Yan had a really hard time linking Sun to the unequalled Thief that could call forth the winds and summon the rain. As a result, he subconsciously overlooked the matters of his past life and treated Sun as he would any other boy at that age.

“This kid's pretty amusing,” Yao Yao walked up to Nie Yan and

commented. She initially believed that Nie Yan was going to coldly reject him. Who knew that he would actually take him on. Perhaps, he really did have a soft heart.

Aside from being a peerless Thief in the previous timeline, his personality was also another factor for why Nie Yan was willing to take him on. If he had been the type of treacherous person who forgot favours and repaid kindness with enmity, then no matter how talented he was, Nie Yan would have still told him to scram.

Sun began shoving all the pieces of equipment that Nie Yan wanted to send back into his bag. Due to him being overly excited, he even dropped a couple of pieces as he haphazardly stuffed his bag full. Hastily picking them back up, he then sorted his bag to make space, and with an embarrassed laugh, he took out a Return Scroll and teleported back to the city.

Beneath the exterior of this up-and-coming genius, it seemed he was also a cheeky little imp.

After Sun left, a thought suddenly crossed Nie Yan's mind. Not knowing how long it would take to clear his red name, in his present circumstances, he would be unable to return to the city for the next few days. During that time, wouldn't the money in the Starry Night Potion Shop start to accumulate? At the very least, there would be several dozen gold just sitting there. If it wasn't invested into something soon, then it would be too much of a waste because the value of gold depreciated with each passing day!

Nie Yan quickly thought up a solution. He could instruct Guo Huai to occasionally withdraw some gold from the Starry Night

Potion Shop and visit Moonlight City and other major cities to purchase a few properties with high-return potential in his place, then have all of them transferred over to his name. Like this, he would no longer have to worry about his money losing its value. At this point in time, investing in real-estate was a stable way to make a guaranteed profit.

When Guo Huai heard that Nie Yan wanted him to go to other cities to purchase land, he couldn't help but ask in a completely flabbergasted manner,「Why don't you just buy land in Calore? Aside from the expensive travelling fees, you also have to pay an extra tax when buying properties in other cities! That's just too wasteful! 」

「Who says I haven't bought land in Calore yet? No need to worry, just follow my instructions. In the future, we'll have to expand to other cities anyway. It'll be more convenient if we already own land there,」Nie Yan rebuked with a faint smile. He had already purchased twenty-two plots of land in Calore. Not only that, but twelve of them were guaranteed to spike immensely in value in the future while the remaining ten would also appreciate considerably. The only reason he had so much money was mainly due to his foresight, like prior, when he had bought large quantities of items that would appreciate and then sold them at a suitable time, earning him vast profits. Outsiders estimated the daily income of the Starry Night Potion Shop at roughly 20 gold, but in reality, Nie Yan's capital was far from limited to being only that. As for how much money it truly made, he would have to wait to find out when Bird calculated it at the end of the week.

Guo Huai was quite taken aback after listening to these words. So it turned out that Nie Yan had already long since purchased

property in Calore. Although he didn't know the exact number of properties Nie Yan owned, he was sure that with Nie Yan's backing, their guild would receive even more opportunities to expand, and most of the work for this major undertaking was happening right now.

After talking to Guo Huai, Nie Yan also contacted Bird. Now was about the right time to gather the market's Tinkerers, but it wouldn't be a mass recruitment. It would be best if he recruited a few covertly first. He handed over a list of players to scout for to Bird. With actual targets, the task would become a lot simpler. Even though the major guilds were also fostering Tinkerers, they weren't attaching much importance to them yet, so they weren't as restricted as Alchemists. Even then, it would be quite strange if these Tinkerers could resist the temptation of the Starry Night Potion Shop's offer. After all, the shop's name was being mentioned left and right. With the promise of benefits, many Tinkerers would definitely be willing to abandon their guilds to join them.

After recruiting enough Tinkerers, when the items they produced actually began having value in the marketplace, he would open another shop that specialized in selling them. If this happened, then he was certain to reap large profits. The amount of money he would earn would be no less than what he made from the Starry Night Potion Shop.

A while later, Sun finally returned. Gasping for breath, he announced, "I'm back."

With all members accounted for, Nie Yan said, "Alright, let's set

off. Let's take full advantage of the time left before the servers shut down and clear up our red names a bit."

The group of four passed through zone after zone as they set out for a distant forested mountain region where the Scaled Frogs spawned. As they passed through higher and higher level zones, Sun became increasingly excited. Were they really heading to a Level 30 zone to train? Wasn't that dangerous? However, this type of risk made him even more eager.

Perhaps every player that chose to play the Thief class had a bit of a thrill-seeking side inside of them.

Chapter 159 – Godly Video

Save for the occasional chirp of insects among the trees, shrubbery, or foliage laden earth, all was quiet in the forest where a gloomy bleakness permeated the atmosphere. Here, signs of player activity were almost nonexistent, and for now, this wouldn't change since almost no one dared to venture forth into this region. When Nie Yan levelled here in his past life, he would often see parties of twos and threes forming teams to grind mobs, among which there was no lack of players with red names. Once in a while, when an Elite or Sub-Elite spawned, the players nearby would frantically fight over it, often resulting in chaotic clashes that littered the place with countless bodies.

In fact, even though levelling in Conviction was rather difficult, if a player focused solely on levelling, they would be able to hit Level 180 in three years' time while the faster ones might even reach Level 200. Though, for many players, between PvPing, exploring new dungeons, taking on bosses above their level, besieging strongholds, and so on, dying was no different than eating breakfast. As such, making any net progress in level was quite challenging. But it was precisely these numerous setbacks that allowed them to grow into genuine experts. In the later stages of the game, it was fairly common for a high-level player with good equipment, however not the skill to match, to be easily defeated by a lower-level but more skilled opponent.

After traversing vast stretches of forest, Nie Yan and company finally heard croaking sounds in the distant, signaling they had arrived at the depths where the Scaled Frogs spawned.

“What's your mana at now? Also, how many potions did you

bring along?” Nie Yan turned to Tang Yao and asked. Without the Arcane Fairy, running out of mana mid-fight became a serious concern.

“Including the few Sun brought over, I have 30 Mana Recovery Potions and 10 Basic Mana Potions,” Tang Yao answered. Although it seemed to be quite a bit at first glance, if they encountered an Elite, it would be far from enough. Mana Potions had set cooldowns, so he wouldn’t be able to chug them down continuously. If he had to stop for even a moment to recover his mana when fighting an Elite, then his mobbing speed would slow down significantly.

Suddenly thinking of a solution, Nie Yan turned to Yao Yao and asked, “Have you learned Mana Transfer?” It was a Holy Mage spell that allowed the caster to transfer a portion of their own mana to a target. Regrettably, with a transfer rate of around 50%–60% it proved to be rather inefficient.

“Yes, I’ve learned it.” Yao Yao nodded. As a Holy Mage who often ran dungeons with her team, Mana Transfer was an indispensable spell. When the situation called for it, she had to be ready to transfer over some of her mana to a Priest. Even though Holy Mages possessed the most raw damage, surpassing even Elementalist and Arcane Mages, to the extent that mobbing would slow down noticeably if they stopped attacking, a large dip in damage in exchange for the whole team’s survival was generally well-worth the trade.

“Nice, that makes things a lot more convenient. Later on, when you see Young Sparrow Hawk running low on mana, you can just

transfer some of yours over to him,” Nie Yan stated. Mana Transfer’s cooldown was around two minutes, while without it being interrupted, it could transfer up to 200 mana. If that was the case, they would no longer have to worry about Tang Yao running out of mana. With the support of Yao Yao and the mana replenishing items, so long as he didn’t cast any especially mana intensive spells such as Meteor, maintaining a consistent damage output wouldn’t be a problem.

“You don’t need me to attack?” Yao Yao asked in a confused manner.

Shaking his head, Nie Yan replied, “No, your level isn’t high enough, so you won’t be able to deal any damage to these Scaled Frogs.”

“How long do you think it’ll take us to take down an Elite Scaled Frog now?” Tang Yao asked.

“I’d say at least an hour. If it’s a Sub-Elite, then probably around half an hour.”

Seeing Tang Yao droop his shoulders in response, Nie Yan patted him on the shoulders and said, “Pull yourself together, we need to level up quickly; otherwise, we’ll be overtaken by Heaven Breaker on the leaderboards. Victorious Return is keeping a watchful eye on us. Even now, our guild members don’t dare to openly wear their guild emblems when they’re out levelling for fear of getting stopped. All because we aren’t powerful enough. If we grow stronger, then we won’t have to fear them or anyone else!”

He was even more profoundly aware that the only reason Victorious Return was willing to take such bold actions against them today was because they knew their targets lacked the strength to retaliate. If Asskickers United possessed formidable might, would they have still dared to act so brazen without the slightest hesitation?

Hearing these words, Tang Yao's expression flickered with deep determination. All of the grievances that he suffered today... he would make sure to pay them back to Heaven Breaker manyfold!

He was finally out of his state of dejection. Shaking his head vigorously, he gave himself a couple of hard slaps to the face, then howled, "Fuck your mother, Heaven Breaker!"

If Tang Yao had stayed depressed, then the guild might have really started to suffer. So, seeing him reignite his fighting will, Nie Yan breathed a sigh of relief.

Some time later, the party arrived at the spawn point of their first Sub-Elite. After Nie Yan set down the Smoke Powder, Tang Yao began bombarding the Scaled Frog with spells.

"It's that easy?" Both Yao Yao and Sun were stunned. They never expected Nie Yan and Tang Yao to be employing this kind of method to take down mobs far above their levels.

For ordinary players, challenging a monster above their level was an extremely risky affair. They would never dare to engage any

monster above them in level that was Leader-class or higher simply because it was just too dangerous. Yet right now, Tang Yao was effortlessly killing a Level 30 Sub-Elite-class Scaled Frog without even receiving so much as a scratch. The scene unfolding right before their eyes went against all common sense!

To put it plain and simple, Yao Yao and Sun were only here to leech experience. The former's only role was to act as an auto-refiling mana potion for Tang Yao while the latter was simply a delivery mule that collected anything that dropped. Meanwhile, Nie Yan made use of his time by scouting the vicinity for more Elites and Sub-Elites. After confirming their location, he arrived back in time to receive experience just before the monster was killed. In this way, they maximized efficiency.

Roughly half an hour later, the Sub-Elite Scaled Frog collapsed to the ground, whereupon the generous amount of experience caused Sun to level up twice, going from Level 7 directly to Level 9. As for Yao Yao, she went from Level 10 to Level 11. Nie Yan and Tang Yao, however, didn't level up, but their experience bars did fill up by a good margin.

"Wow, levelling here is so quick! I actually levelled up twice!" Sun exclaimed in pleasant surprise. He still found the situation a little hard to wrap his head around. Before dropping several levels, it had taken him nearly two days of mindless grinding to get from Level 7 to Level 9. Yet now, it had been compressed down to the span of half an hour!

Yao Yao was also amazed by this levelling speed. So it turned out Nie Yan and Tang Yao were actually levelling like this. No wonder

Tang Yao was able to rise up to the number one position on the leaderboards so quickly. There was no way the levelling speed of others could compare to them!

“Nie Yan, how did you come up with such a way to level up?” Yao Yao looked inquisitively at Nie Yan as her sharp-witted eyes brimmed with suspicion.

“The library contains detailed bestiaries on all sorts of monsters. It’s pretty easy to find their weak points. Sun, what did it drop?” Nie Yan could only reply with his go-to excuse before quickly changing the subject.

“A piece of battle armour and a Paladin’s hammer. They’re both unappraised.”

“Hand them over to me, I’ll appraise them.”

“Alright.”

After receiving the items, Nie Yan appraised them with Transcendent Insight. The armour was Silver-grade while the hammer was Gold-grade, both with decent properties but they could only be equipped at Level 30. Since no one could use them for the time being, they would be stored in the treasury to await the day when a player took their fancy.

A guild member was required to pay 1000 merit points to withdraw a piece of Level 30 Silver-grade equipment out of the

treasury, while a piece of Level 30 Gold-grade equipment would cost at least 3000 merit points. Hence, for now, they were certain to be left untouched, but for the members of the guild, the simple knowledge of so many pieces of high-level equipment being available was enough to boost their morale considerably.

After putting away the drops, Nie Yan and the group set off for the location of an Elite.

“Nie Yan, why do you think that Killer’s Demonic Medallion still hasn’t dropped?” Tang Yao asked in frustration. Logically speaking, shouldn’t the severity of their red names have already long met the requirements?

“I’m not sure. The medallion’s drop rate is pretty low. Let’s keep trying. It would be great if it dropped, but if doesn’t, then so be it,” Nie Yan answered. The Killer’s Demonic Medallion had amazing properties that made it the best accessory in the early levels of the game. In his past life, the value of one was equivalent to a Sub-Legendary item. Back then, it had long since attracted the eyes of all players. So it was only natural that such a godly accessory couldn’t be obtained so easily.

“Alright, let’s keep searching then.”

...

The conclusion of the standoff between Victorious Return and Holy Empire became a topic of discussion among players. However, there was another matter currently attracting their

attention, and that was a clip being shared en masse on the Viridian Empire's forums. Several threads discussing it were at the top of the board, overshadowing even Tang Yao's popularity.

Nie Yan and the others casually glanced at the titles of these threads.

「What a Godly Player!」

「Who is this God?!」

「Look at this Awesome Thief!」

...

After seeing the titles of these threads, Nie Yan and Tang Yao couldn't help but smile. Fortunately, when Guo Huai released the video of the battle, he had edited out the portions that directly showed Nie Yan. So all that could be seen of him was his silhouette successively slaughtering quite a few Victorious Return players in the background. Even then, how could anyone not notice such an amazing scene. As a result, many were inquiring about this matchless Thief who was cutting down Victorious Return players like chopping spring onions. However, their questions remained unanswered. Victorious Return wouldn't divulge it; Holy Empire didn't reveal it; and Asskickers United was radio silent as well. Thus, Nie Yan's identity remained a riddle. In this way, he kept true to his style of always staying low-key. However, all members of Asskickers United now knew that aside from their valiant, unparalleled guild leader, Young Sparrow Hawk... there was also

another supreme figure among their ranks, and he was a Thief! Sadly, he had yet to appear to them in public, so he was shrouded in mystery.

The battle between 20 Asskicker United players versus 300 Victorious Return elites was quickly becoming a legend among players. There were even many elite players that decided to apply to Asskickers United after watching the video, causing the guild to rapidly expand. Consequently, after enlisting so many elites, their numbers finally broke through the ten thousand mark. Although they still couldn't compare with those major guilds, they could already be considered somewhat famous among the second-rate guilds. If Heaven Breaker wished to trample over them again, he wouldn't find it so easy as last time. Furthermore, due to the video being released, Victorious Return's prestige had suffered a serious blow. Along with so many things piling up because of upcoming events, they had even less time to pay attention to Asskickers United. At this moment, their elite team was frantically levelling, resulting in Heaven Breaker finally breaking through to Level 16 as he attempted to reclaim his spot on top of the leaderboards from Tang Yao. At the same time, he had also dispatched numerous Thieves to track down Nie Yan and Tang Yao in the hopes of inconveniencing them while they trained. However, all of his efforts were futile as none of the players he sent out would ever think to search in a Level 30 zone.

Chapter 160 – Seeking Shelter

After two hours, three more Sub-Elite Scaled Frogs had fallen to the ground.

“The Starry Night Potion Shop is gathering ingredients to create Intermediate Mana Potions right now. When the first batch is made, I’ll give you guys a few,” Nie Yan said. A pity that these potions couldn’t be used as freely as their lower-ranked counterparts. After all, concocting them was just too expensive for now. It was fine to keep one or two in case of emergencies, but to down them frivolously as they grinded mobs? At present, very few, if any, could bear the burden of such a cost.

Even though Tang Yao’s mana was now in short supply, without the support of his Arcane Fairy, he was still able to deal with Sub-Elites without much effort. As for Elites, for the time being, killing them was a bit inefficient. They took much more effort and time to kill. Nevertheless, the drop quality from the Sub-Elites wasn’t too bad and they still gave a good amount of experience.

Apart from Tang Yao who had to focus on the Scaled Frogs, the rest of them had very little to do. Nie Yan took advantage of this time to message a few people.

「[Godslayer](#), you there?」

Godslayer of Yore first appears in Chapter 66.

「Yeah, what’s up? I saw the video of Young Sparrow Hawk on the forums. Is he your friend? That Thief in the background should be you, right?」Godslayer of Yore asked in pleasant surprise after

noticing the sender was Nie Yan,

「Yep, he is. We just established a guild. Are you interested in joining? I plan to pull a few others to form the guild's elite team,」 Nie Yan replied. Although the quality of the team would be far from his ideal, rounding up twenty decently skilled players was nevertheless a good start.

「Phew... after not hearing anything back from you these past couple of days, I was starting to get worried, but now you've finally established a guild!」

「My name is red at the moment, so you'll have to wait a few days for me to get it back to normal. In any case, join our guild first.」

「Sure, sure, Asskickers United, right? If I still didn't hear about it by now, then I'd have been living under a rock this whole time.」

Nie Yan notified Guo Huai and the others in advance that Godslayer of Yore and his friends would be coming over to join their guild. Then, he hit up [Leader Young Seven](#) and his group, informing them he was finally forming a team. They were simply ecstatic upon hearing this, but why wouldn't they be? Ever since meeting him, they had been eagerly waiting for this day to come.

Leader Young Seven and his group first appear in Chapter 75, but only have any real meaningful interaction with Nie Yan in Chapter 81.

Nie Yan valued their group quite highly. In his past life, Young Leader Seven was one of the Seven Grand Priests, so his prospects

weren't something to be looked down upon. The two most important roles in a team were without a doubt the main healer and main tank. They were very literally the life of the team, with a huge influence on whether a run would succeed or prematurely end in a wipe. Aside from Young Leader Seven, there was also Forgotten, a Shadow Dancer in the previous timeline. Although he wasn't as dazzling as Sun, among the vast ocean of players, he was definitely a figure that was hard to come by. Then, there was Yi Yan. He could also be considered as noteworthy among Fighters.

Finally, Nie Yan contacted [Resplendent Bladelight](#). If he were able to get him to join their guild, then the team would be perfect.

Resplendent Bladelight first appears in Chapter 59. He's the co-founder of the guild, Unhindered, but was betrayed by his friend, Hei Zhou.

A Fighter ranked in the top three, one of the Seven Grand Priests, two Shadow Dancers, the rank eleven Fighter, and Godslayer of Yore and his friends were all notable players in the previous timeline. Add Nie Yan with his ten years of gaming experience, and where could you find a guild that was able to assemble such a stacked lineup?

Even Victorious Return, Holy Empire, and Radiant Sacred Flame combined wouldn't be able to pull it off!

When he thought of Sun, he couldn't help but wonder... if Asskickers United was able to attract a legendary player like him, then perhaps there were a few more good seedlings that had yet to be found.

Because of Nie Yan and Tang Yao, Asskickers United was no longer considered a third-rate guild as experts started to trickle in. After noticing the guild had yet to form an elite team, some of the shrewder ones joined with the intention of trying out while they still had a chance, hoping to ride on the coattails of their success. After all, it was better to grab ahold of a chicken's neck than a phoenix's tail. With godly experts like Nie Yan and Tang Yao at the helm, anyone who joined their team was guaranteed to have a bright future.

With Young Seven, Resplendent Bladelight, and the others joining, Nie Yan would finally have the framework for an elite team. All he had to do afterwards was recruit a few passable, temporary fill-ins with clean backgrounds and the team would be pretty much established.

Naturally, for them to genuinely mature into a formidable force, everyone would have to persevere through many trials and hardships.

As for Yu Lan's team, Nie Yan had no intention of disbanding them. The strength of the auxiliary teams was just as important to the growth of a guild, and generally, there would be at least ten or more of them.

「You established a guild?」Resplendent Bladelight asked after receiving Nie Yan's message. His brows were knitted in contemplation.

「Not bad, right? So, after leaving Unhindered, have you found another guild yet?」Nie Yan asked.

「Can't say that I have...」

「If that's the case, then why not join mine?」

「If I join your guild, I have a group of brothers that will also want to follow me. They're a rowdy bunch that don't like authority. Are you willing to take them in?」

「As long as they don't break any of the guild's rules, I'm more than willing to welcome them. If they really get unruly, then I can only rely on you to control them. How many of them are there?」 Nie Yan asked. He didn't believe for a second that merely a few dozen players could create much of a ruckus in the guild.

「At least a thousand,」Bladelight replied.

Nie Yan nearly jumped up in fright. He couldn't help but ask, 「You're not trying to take all of Unhindered with you, right?」

「No, not really. It's less than half of the guild. All of them left voluntarily. They insist that I start a new guild with them, but I've no interest in managing guild affairs, and they refuse to follow anyone else. Some of my brothers are still in Unhindered, but if I join your guild, they'll definitely come over as well. I sincerely hope that if I join, you'll let them in too,」Bladelight requested. During these bleak times, what moved him the most was his band of brothers. No matter how disheartened he felt, they still never left his side. So even though he didn't wish to be restricted, for the sake of giving them a place to settle, he was willing to give Nie

Yan's offer a go.

Nie Yan considered the pros and cons. Bladelight's brothers made up nearly half of Unhindered's strength. It would be a chance for more growth if such a force were to join Asskickers United. But at the same time, these players were only loyal to Bladelight and wouldn't necessarily be under his and Tang Yao's control. Therefore, there was a certain factor of risk at play. If Bladelight sincerely wished to join, reigned his brothers in, and told them to assimilate, then they would slowly be absorbed into the guild. However, if Bladelight's heart wasn't fully into it and he decided to leave later on, bringing his brothers along with him, it would be a huge loss for them.

To accept or reject... this was actually a bit difficult to decide. From what Nie Yan recalled of Bladelight's personality, he was a trustworthy person, and he was never a wildly ambitious person to begin with.

「Fine, I'll let them in. I'll treat them just the same as ordinary members,」Nie Yan finally gave his reply. Asskickers United was already ten thousand strong. What difference could another thousand make? Besides, players tended to interact and befriend one another quite frequently, so Bladelight's brothers would surely be digested quite quickly.

「You don't have any doubts?」

「What doubts?」

「You're not worried about me trying to seize power?」

Nie Yan chuckled and calmly replied,「If you truly cared for power, you would have never left Unhindered. With your prestige there, I don't believe for a second you had no chance of vying with Hei Zhuo for control of the guild. If you two truly fought it out, perhaps right now, Unhindered would no longer have him as the guild leader. Yet, you still left of your own volition. Even though he betrayed you so heinously, you still valued what was left of the friendship between you two. I think this is why so many of your brothers were willing to follow you. After joining my guild, you'll still be as you were before, Bladelight, but I definitely won't be Hei Zhuo!」

Bladelight was struck by his words. He emotionally replied,「Thank you for putting your trust in me. After joining your guild, I'll make sure my brothers don't cause any trouble.」His mind relaxed as he breathed a sigh of relief. Giving them a place to belong to was one of his most pressing concerns, but he had never found a suitable guild. A few guild leaders had contacted him before, but none of them were worthy of his respect. Nie Yan, however, had more than earned it.

Bladelight joining was a great boon for Asskickers United. It would allow their strength to have another substantial spur. With his prestige, he would attract even more players to the guild. In this way, they would truly start to rival those top-ranked, second-rate guilds that were only beneath Victorious Return, Holy Empire, and the other major guilds.

「I've been thinking for a bit. Asskickers United will probably

need a few vice-leaders. How about it, I can give you the position.」

「No need, I have no interest in managing the guild.」

With one of his worries relieved, Bladelight was finally starting to get over his falling out with Hei Zhuo.

「I can let you not do any work, but you must accept the position of vice-leader. Even if you don't mind, I'm sure your brothers will,」Nie Yan said. If he assigned Bladelight the position of vice-leader, he would be able to appease the brothers following him.

Bladelight thought for a moment before finally relenting. He nodded his head, then said,「Fine.」He acknowledged that Nie Yan's words were quite reasonable.

「You can head over to our headquarters. Right now the acting leader is a player called Watchful Snail. I'll inform him that you and your brothers will be arriving, then he'll deal with the task of adding you guys in,」Nie Yan said.

「Alright.」

「I'll let Watchful Snail handle the matters regarding the elite team. I've already informed him of the few players I have in mind. You should form a team with them first and start running dungeons. After you clear all the low-level dungeons and accumulate some guild Honour, we'll make some adjustments. With the average skill, level, and equipment of the team, I'm sure

clearing Sosil Valley won't be a problem,」Nie Yan said. A guild had to clear all the Special Instances in order to gain a certain amount of Honour. After accumulating enough honour, they would be able to receive certain rewards from the administrator that would aid them in their growth such as an upgrade to the guild headquarters. Besides money, a certain amount of Honour was required as well. The lowest level guild had a maximum size of 20,000 players. After that, they would need to accumulate enough Honour to advance to a Level 2 guild.

「No problem, I'll start running dungeons. You should hurry and focus on clearing your red name,」Bladelight replied.

「Right.」Nie Yan nodded. When Bladelight was running the dungeons with Leader Young Seven, Godslayer, and the others, he could give them some simple guidance. With their strength and skill, and his guidance, they would have no problems clearing these dungeons on Expert or even Specialist!

Chapter 161 – Locked Dark Gold Chest

When they arrived at the next location, Nie Yan employed the usual method by popping a pouch of Smoke Powder near the Sub-Elite Scaled Frog. Then, after the smoke enveloped it and the immediate surroundings, he would hand over the reins to Tang Yao.

Aside from the impacts of Tang Yao's spells, all was tranquil in the forest. Every so often, soft, rustling noises could be heard from the nearby underbrush as small animals passed through.

In the distance, the faint and almost indiscernible sound of flowing water softly reverberated in the background.

“Is there a lake or stream nearby?” Yao Yao asked. Akin to a zither, the gentle sound floated amidst the trees and stretched far across the forest.

“Lake?” Nie Yan's mind trembled. He suddenly recalled that there was indeed a lake near the Scaled Frog zone. It was a small forest lake, hidden from view by tall, exuberant trees. At its very center was a small isle where rumours told was the location of an abandoned Dark Elf shrine. Supposedly, ancient crafting recipes could be found there.

It's close by anyway... can't hurt to go check things out. If there's nothing there, I can just head back.

Not much later, server closing time approached. At this moment,

Tang Yao killed his last Scaled Frog for the day, and as he did, a bright radiance enveloped Nie Yan followed by a crisp, system jingle.

Nie Yan checked his status bar. He was now Level 17, the same as Tang Yao; however, Tang Yao's experience bar was nearly filled to the top, so he would soon be levelling up to Level 18.

"There's still about eighteen minutes left. You guys should find a safe place, preferably hidden from view from any mobs, to log off from," Nie Yan said. He looked at the day's harvest; three pieces of equipment, a Level 30 Silver-grade Armour Blueprint, an Intermediate Potion Recipe, and several Fortune Gems.

He and the others currently received a huge increase in drop rate since they were hunting monsters far above their level. Furthermore, the Scaled Frogs they killed were all Sub-Elites, so the profits they reaped were immense. If they were hunting here in the previous timeline, then it would be very difficult for them to run into an Elite or Sub-Elite. Even if they did, many nearby players would attempt to snatch the kill away. It was a classic case of too many monks and not enough gruel. As such, the average yield from a day's worth of grinding would merely amount to one or two pieces of Silver or Gold-grade equipment. Most of the time, any group that could secure even a Leader-class monster for themselves would be considered very lucky. However, Nie Yan and the others had gone far ahead of others by hunting in this map when most players would never yet dream to. Moreover, Nie Yan knew exactly where to find the Elites and Sub-Elites, so it was clear to see the advantage he held over others.

Sun was now Level 11 while Yao Yao had risen to Level 12; she was only a smidgen away from Level 13. Both were shocked by their levelling speeds. It was simply too fast!

“Big Bros, Big Sis, I’ll see you guys tomorrow!” Sun waved goodbye before logging off.

“I’m heading off as well. See you guys later,” Yao Yao said before going offline.

“You’re not getting off?” Tang Yao asked as he felt Nie Yan didn’t seem like he wanted to log out just yet.

“There’s still around fifteen minutes left. I’m going to explore around a bit. Here, take these five pouches of Smoke Powder. Also, these are the spawn locations of a few Sub-Elites, record them down. If I’m not back by the time you get back online tomorrow, give Sun the Smoke Powder and you guys can continue on without me,” Nie Yan said before handing over the items to Tang Yao.

After thinking for a moment, Tang Yao nodded his head and said, “Fine,” before taking the Smoke Powder. If Nie Yan didn’t wish to tell him, then he wouldn’t pry. Besides, he held complete confidence in him. After all, with his skill and elusiveness, there was no need to worry about him encountering any real danger.

“It’s about time you get off too.”

“Well, see you tomorrow,” Tang Yao said. His body gradually

turned illusory before disappearing completely.

After Tang Yao left, Nie Yan followed the sound of flowing water, eventually coming across a small stream where he walked along its bank. He encountered many Scaled Frogs on his trek that he would avoid by stealthing and making detours around them.

Along his path, he stumbled upon a wooden treasure chest. After opening it, he retrieved a piece of Level 30 White-grade equipment. It was a disappointing find. Was his luck really that poor? Nevertheless, he could still receive 5 silver or more by selling it to an NPC merchant, and there was also the option of recycling it into raw materials. The latter might be a bit more expensive, but it was better than nothing.

As he travelled further down the stream, reaching the yet to be explored depths of this forest, he eventually exited the Scaled Frog area and arrived at an opening where he was greeted by the sight of a lake in the distance. It wasn't all that large, covering maybe a tenth of a square kilometer, but still gave home to a very small piece of land.

You've discovered Forest Lake Stratyn.

In his past life, there were rumours that a player had uncovered several recipes from the isle in the middle of this lake. Uncommon recipes found in Level 30 maps would usually be at least Intermediate-rank, making them quite valuable. For a person like Nie Yan who owned a thriving potion shop, every new recipe was

of great importance.

He stood at the edge of the lake. It was serene without the slightest ripple. Even so, he recalled that monsters spawned in its depths, among which included Elites and Sub-Elites. Right now, his life was far too valuable. If he died, he would drop too many important items. Thus, he was increasingly vigilant when undertaking any risk.

He didn't believe himself capable of soloing a Level 30 Sub-Elite on land, let alone underwater where he was much less mobile. Even encountering a common monster would be extremely dangerous in such a scenario.

Nie Yan observed the isle in the distance which was about 30 meters away. Numerous willows dotted the shore, each reaching about fifty or sixty meters in height, casting shadows over the lake as their slender, drooping branches lazily hung just above the water's surface.

He even noticed how the willows' lush foliage intertwined with its branches in a seemingly chaotic manner.

He suddenly had a thought. Even if he couldn't directly swim over from the shore, he still had a chance of reaching the isle!

Walking up to a nearby willow, he activated the Crawler Ring ability. Then, as if he were a spider, he nimbly clambered up its trunk before perching on a thick and solid branch near the top. As he surveyed his surroundings, he estimated the tree branch across

from him was about ten meters away.

“Should be about right,” he silently muttered to himself while judging the distance. A second later, he suddenly leaped forward.

He was still at least twenty meters away from the water’s edge. Borrowing the forward momentum of his jump, he barrelled toward the lake.

As he fell, he activated the Silk Spinner Ring’s ability, shooting out a line of silk which adhered to the branch he had been eying prior. Soon, the web line tensed, converting the potential energy from his fall into kinetic energy that flung him forward like a child on a swing.

Nearing the peak of his momentum, he withdrew the web line and continued soaring through the air.

On his rapid descent toward the isle, he went into a landing roll before regaining his footing.

-23 A damage value floated up above his head.

Patting the dust off of his clothes, a faint smile emerged on his face as he glanced back at the opposite shore. He had succeeded in his attempt. Owning both the Silk Spinner Ring and Crawler Ring really was quite advantageous.

In the distance, a Water Snake gradually broke through the

water's surface. It was about five to six meters long with yellow and white scales dotting its body. As it swam about, ripples spread out across the lake. It was probably a Level 30 or higher monster. He didn't dare to be careless as he entered stealth, then proceeded to take cover behind a nearby patch of shrubbery.

Being unable to find any trace of Nie Yan, the Water Snake dived back down into the water and disappeared into the lake's depths.

Nie Yan's tension eased as he breathed a sigh of relief. If he had chosen to swim across the lake instead, rather than jumping over, then he could hardly imagine what could've happened.

The isle was merely nine hundred square meters across. As he explored around, he found no monsters roaming about. In fact, other than several trees, there really didn't seem to be anything on this isle. At its center was a very large tree that towered above the rest. Sadly, it had long since died, its trunks hollowed out by insects, but hidden within was a faded black treasure chest. Many ancient treasure chests, after not being uncovered for who knows how long, had corroded over time, collecting dust as they lost even the faintest shimmer.

He walked up to the treasure chest which permeated a timeworn air. Its design dated back to the Dark Era when the Dragon race reigned supreme. It was far more ancient than any chest he had encountered thus far. Older, historically rich chests tended to contain better items. This was common knowledge among players.

As he wiped off the mud and dirt that stained the chest, a dark golden lustre caught his eye.

Dark Gold!

His eyes twinkled in excitement.

To this date, he had never come across a Dark Gold treasure chest before. Even in his past life, he had only heard rumours of their existence. They were guaranteed to produce an item of at least Dark Gold-grade. Most of the time, they contained Sub-Legendary items. There was even a chance of obtaining a Legendary item fragment. Naturally, the likelihood of that was very low.

I hope it's not locked... Nie Yan bent down as he attempted to open the chest. As his right hand came in contact with a lock, an immense sense of disappointment welled forth inside him. It was sealed by a small, delicate lock. Its intricate design was worthy of praise.

It was by far the most sophisticated lock he had ever come across. At the very least, it would require Specialist Lockpicking to unlock or possibly a Specialist Key since an ordinary key absolutely wouldn't work.

He let out a bitter chuckle. Truthfully, this was to be expected. How could a chest of such rarity be sitting so freely in the open, almost as if it were just waiting for him to unlock it?

Even though he knew there were hidden treasures on this isle, what he ended up finding greatly disappointed him.

Just as he was about to reluctantly move on, after some more reflection, he suddenly found this situation very strange. Logically speaking, a player would only have Specialist Lockpicking after they advanced to a Great Thief. In other words, it would take at least five to six years, seven or eight at most, for a player capable of unlocking this chest to appear. However, considering how popular this area was in his past life, that meant numerous players would've long since found it. The discovery of a Dark Gold chest would have definitely rapidly spread across the playerbase. Yet why was it that he had never heard of such a chest appearing in this place before?

Unless a player arrived here before anyone else had and furthermore possessed the Specialist Lockpicking skill required to remove the items inside the chest, subsequently causing it to disappear, there was no way players would not know of its existence.

Even most Great Thieves didn't possess Specialist Lockpicking. It wasn't a skill that could be obtained as one simply pleased, but rather, it required the player to pick open tens of thousands of locks to achieve such a level.

There was only one possibility. There was another method to open this chest! Perhaps, he would be able to find a special key.

Thinking to this point, Nie Yan stood up. The answer was definitely located on this isle! This place was also the location of an abandoned Dark Elf shrine. Maybe the two were connected!

As he glanced at the in-game clock, he noticed the servers were just about to shut down. Right now, there wasn't enough time. He'd have to continue when he logged back on.

Chapter 162 – Shrine

Some time after disconnecting from the game, Nie Yan contacted Guo Huai, Hao Cheng, and Zhao Li. He learned from them that the matter regarding Resplendent Bladelight joining the guild had already been settled. Furthermore, Asskickers United had grown to a staggering 16,000 members before the number of players applying slowed to a trickle. Even so, a guild of that size was rarely seen in the present day. No longer completely preoccupied with adding new players, Guo Huai and the others began dividing up the task of investigating the backgrounds of each individual who had already joined. Anyone they found suspicious would be booted from the guild. Although they wouldn't be completely mole-free, it would at least ensure their ranks were a little purer.

After tallying up the guild members, the proportion of players above Level 9 reached just under 20%. It was a little on the low side, but it still wasn't bad.

When Bladelight, Leader Young Seven, and the others formed the elite team, according to standard convention, they were all required to sign a contract. It stated that if they wanted to leave the team, they would have to return everything given to them as well as pay a huge penalty fee. An elite team wasn't something you could just join or withdraw from as you pleased. Every guild would invest heavily into them, so each member was quintessential. If any of them were to suddenly resign, it would be an immense loss for the guild, so that was why it was necessary that they were all bound by contracts.

Naturally, there were benefits as well. Joining the elite team meant that the player would receive much more resources from

the guild, letting them grow considerably faster than ordinary players. So given the opportunity, many would still sign the contract.

After the elite team was established, the guild's sole Revive skill book was given to Young Seven.

At this point in time, a Revive skill book was almost priceless. Even if someone offered several dozen gold, they still wouldn't necessarily be able to obtain one because it was just so rare. Right now, nearly none of the major guilds had it, as it was only starting to become more prevalent when the player base neared Level 20.

Revive could only resurrect a fallen teammate outside of combat. When running a dungeon, sometimes, before even clearing half of it, a team would suffer too many casualties to proceed forward. But with Revive, they could be brought back to life. Furthermore, when facing the final boss, it would be very difficult for a team to get through unscathed. Often times, many team members would be sacrificed before it could finally be killed. With revive, however, these losses could be averted.

As such, for Bladelight, Young Seven, and the other members of the elite team, Revive would significantly reduce the stress of doing dungeon runs.

So far, everything was going according to plan. Even though there might be a few snags along the way, Nie Yan was convinced that with their skills, when everyone got more familiar with one another, they would definitely display incredible ability.

Finished chatting with Guo Huai and the others, Nie Yan proceeded to go through his usual routine of working out, practicing martial arts, and studying. Recently, he felt his body was brimming with strength. His reflexes had also become even sharper than before. Moreover, he had grown about three centimeters taller while his physique also turned more muscular.

As the day when his parents would return home drew near, he grew increasingly eager as an intense sense of yearning welled up inside him.

Around noon, his aunts and uncles had come for another visit. After discovering his parents still weren't back, they could only leave in disappointment. Ever since becoming aware of him being a very good candidate of passing the entrance exam for the top-ranked military school in the country, even if they were rather reluctant to treat him with courtesy, even to the point of smiling and fawning over him, they had no choice but to do so. But in their minds, they were still resentfully mulling over the money his parents owed them.

Nie Yan really didn't want to utilize his in-game gold since every coin held incredible value before the real world currency exchange opened. Sadly, the black market conversion rate for in-game gold was far below its actual worth. Furthermore, some powerful figures could lower the conversation rate more by manipulating the market, so selling his in-game gold was tantamount to letting himself be swindled. Besides, each copper coin in his pocket would represent a slight advantage over Cao Xu in the future.

Nie Yan gave Tang Yao a phone call.「Hey, Tang Yao. Do you have some money right now? Lend me some, I'll pay you back later.」

「How much do you need?」Tang Yao asked in a confused manner. Very rarely did Nie Yan ever ask to borrow money.

「Probably ¥500,000 or so,」Nie Yan answered after giving it some thought. This was the first time he had outright asked Tang Yao to borrow money. However, when his parents returned in a few days, he would be able to pay it back in full.

「So much!? Alright, just give me your bank info. I'll wire the money over.」

「You're not going to ask why I'm borrowing so much money?」

「You almost never ask me for money, so when you do, not to mention so much at once, I know it's something important. You definitely have a good reason for asking. But if you don't wish to say it, I won't try to pry. No matter how much you need, I'll still help you get it even if I have to go around begging others; otherwise, how could I possibly call myself your brother!? We've known each other since we were both in diapers!」Tang Yao replied. When his family became well-off, he had an increasing number of people trying to curry favour with him as the number that treated him sincerely quickly declined. The overwhelming majority of people that approached him had underlying motives which caused him to treasure the relation he had with Nie Yan even more. From his perspective, friendship was priceless. He was in no shortage of money, but true friends were hard to come by!

「Before my dad left, he borrowed some money from a few people. Well, they've been hounding me recently, trying to collect the debt. I don't want to convert my in-game gold to pay it back, so I can only go to you,」Nie Yan explained.

「Oh, you mean those snobby relatives of yours? Don't worry, sooner or later, there'll come a day when they regret how they treated you!」Tang Yao sneered. Knowing how well Nie Yan was expanding in Conviction, when the real world currency exchange opened, his personal wealth would definitely skyrocket to frightening levels. Then, he'd have no reason to mind such trivial pocket change.

A while later, he received a text message from Tang Yao.「Alright, the money should be in your account now. I've wired it over.」

Nie Yan headed to the bank to withdraw the money before walking over to the homes of his relatives. They didn't live all that far from his house. They were actually all in the same district, close enough to meet on a daily basis, but he had never felt the slightest hint of affection from any of them to the extent that he felt more familial love from his next door neighbours.

He conked on the metal gates of his Uncle Luo Ming's home.

“Who's there?” A loathsome voice that resembled a duck being strangled answered the knocks. It belonged to his uncle's wife.

“It's me.” Nie Yan's cold voice echoed out without the slightest

trace of anger. He couldn't bother wasting his emotions on people he planned to have nothing to do with in the future.

Upon seeing him after opening the gate, his uncle's wife revealed repulsed expression, but after recalling a certain something, her face turned rigid. In a stiff tone, she asked, "Oh... W-why if it isn't Little Yan? Do you need something? Would you like to come in...?" However, she made no effort to move out of the way to let him in.

"No thanks. I have a question. How much money do my parents owe you?"

"¥170,000. Adding interest, it's about ¥220,000. Why, something the matter?" Luo Ming's wife glanced at him and asked.

"I have the money. Go fetch the loan agreement my parents signed." Nie Yan's tone became even icier. What was this interest rate!? They were practically loan sharks! He could only imagine how much humiliation his parents endured when they asked to borrow money. For his relatives to only agree to the loan with such a high interest rate... his parents would have been better off asking strangers! If his father's business had failed, what then? Not even in a lifetime would they have been able to recover from this debt!

He lost himself in deep thought. Back when he was naive, not only had he been unaware of the pressure his parents were under, but he even resented them for abandoning him! He had even constantly reminded them of it, leading them to feel guilt and self-loathing. They couldn't even live a single day of their lives in happiness. In this life, however, he wouldn't allow such tragedy to repeat itself. He would grow strong enough to protect his friends

and loved ones!

“Brat, where did you get this money...?” Luo Ming’s wife couldn’t but ask in a daze after seeing Nie Yan take out so much cash.

“Cut the crap! Bring out the damn loan agreement!” Nie Yan’s expression turned glacial.

Seeing him flare out in anger, Luo Ming’s wife immediately reigned in any of her attitude. With how things have changed now, if he really did get angered, then it’d be very hard to predict what sorts of troubles might arise in the future! She hastily ran back into the house and returned to him with the loan agreement.

After Nie Yan confirmed that the handwriting on the agreement was indeed his father’s, he couldn’t be bothered to converse with his aunt any further and directly turned to leave.

“Really strange... just how did that brat get so much money? Could it be...?” As Luo Ming’s wife got to this point in her line of thought, she felt a chill run down her spine and she hurriedly closed the metal gate.

Nie Yan went from house to house, knocking on his relatives’ doors to pay back the money his parents owed. He was finally done with the matter by the time it was afternoon.

「You paid them all back?」Tang Yao asked on the phone.

「Yeah, the matter is settled. Thanks again. Wait a few days for me to pay you back the money I borrowed,」Nie Yan replied. As he compared Tang Yao with those relatives of his, he couldn't help but feel a sense of warmth in his heart.

「No need to rush. It's nothing.」Tang Yao waved his hands. It wasn't as if he was in urgent need of money. Then, he was suddenly reminded of something.「You might as well pay me back in-game.」

「That's fine too.」Nie Yan nodded. Even though the current black market conversion rate was terrible, in-game gold was still pretty valuable. After all, gold was still very scarce right now.

「I'll probably be busy when I get back online. You guys should go ahead without me.」

「Ah, alright.」

After hanging up the call with Tang Yao, he worked out for the rest of the day. When evening arrived, he returned to the world of Conviction.

For the sake of finding the key for the dark gold chest, he began scouring every inch of the isle, not leaving the slightest rock unturned. His search eventually led him near the ruins of a shrine, more than a dozen meters away from the shore, where he reaped an unexpected harvest. Tucked away in the corner of a ruin, he found a silver treasure chest which contained two recipes.

He examined both—Dark Elf's Borer Toxin Recipe and Dark Elf's Arrow Poison Recipe. The former was the recipe of a poison used to coat blades, swords, daggers, and other sharp-edged weaponry. The latter was the recipe of a poison used specifically to coat bolts and arrows. Both were Intermediate-rank. The Borer Toxin dealt 30 damage per second for 20 seconds, and its ingredients included a certain type of larvae that was very difficult to obtain. At least a Level 30 player was required to gather it. As for the Dark Elf Arrow Poison, it dealt 50 additional on-hit poison damage. Its ingredients, on the other hand, were relatively easy to acquire consisting of over seven different types of common plants. The manufacturing cost for each vial was at least 10 silver, and it could be used three times. Arrow poisons generally sold the worst out of all stocked goods, so there wasn't much financial benefit to putting them up for sale in the shop. But to Nie Yan, it was actually very useful. When he returned, he definitely had to make the Alchemists back at the Starry Night Potion Shop produce some.

Weeds grew all over the ruins, leaving him barely able to make out the silhouette of the shrine. Could the key for the dark gold chest really be found over there? Nie Yan couldn't help but hold some doubts.

Chapter 163 – Dullahan Cavalry Crossbow

Loose chunks of rock lay scattered across the ruins of this shrine. The scripture of the dragons could be seen engraved on their surfaces, though barely discernable with the passage of time. In the distant Dark Era, the dark elves were the servants of the dragons. They regarded them as divine existences. Even their sacred texts which were written in the language of the dragons reflected as such.

Their history and culture were deeply entrenched in their subservience to the dragons. Even a millennium later, they still regarded themselves as lowly vassals that didn't dare to go against the will of those from the dragon race.

Around the shrine altar lay the skeletal remains of different creatures, some of which were the skulls of humans, piled together in heaps.

Nie Yan could imagine how the chiefs of small dark elf tribes would offer the lives of various creatures in ritual sacrifices to the dragons. During the Era of Shared Governance, when the reign of the dragons was finally toppled, the dark elves suffered retaliation from the humans, high elves, and the other races for their heinous acts, ensuing in a mass genocide that resulted in the dark elves completely disappearing from the continent. Numerous of their tribes sought refuge in the isolated Underworld, but many places on the continent still held traces of their past.

When he approached the shrine, more than a dozen chunks of rock flew up from the ground. Each stone emitted a strong aura of

darkness while the characters engraved on them glowed with an eerie light.

Relying on his knowledge of Dragon Tongue, he was able to decipher the meaning of some of the characters, “god of destruction,” “denizens of the remote darkness,” “secluded dimension of evil...” but he found it difficult to piece them all together.

Just what sort of message were these dozen or so floating pieces of rock trying to convey?

There are still remnants of dark magic left over from the Dark Era in the abandoned dark elf shrine. After some cautious interaction, you discover that it opens a portal to another dimension. This is a powerful magic!

You silently muse to yourself. The dark elves were the servants of the dragons. What could these despicable creatures have been doing in this place?

While reading the system notifications, from the corner of his eye, Nie Yan suddenly noticed the stones converging at the center of the altar before a dark portal slowly emerged.

Being only a few feet from the portal, he took a prudent step back

when it emerged. Where it led to or whether it posed a threat to him were still unknowns!

I can't take any chances!

Conviction had way too many strange maps that were fraught with danger. For the sake of preserving his Chapter of Courage and Chapter of Freedom, he firmly decided to renounce this opportunity.

However, just as he was about to turn to leave, he felt a powerful suction force pulling on his body. His face turned ashen with fright. He wanted to retreat, but the powerful force coming from the portal was simply too hard to resist!

“Ah!” Nie Yan lost his footing.

And like the mouth of an enormous demon, the dark portal gobbled him up in one fell swoop.

Inside the darkness of the portal, everything went black as he lost consciousness.

After he was pulled into the portal, the stones suspended in midair around the altar slowly dimmed. Losing the energy powering them, they fell back to the ground.

...

“Did Nirvana Flame go offline?” Sun turned to Tang Yao and asked in a puzzled tone. Nie Yan’s name had just gone dim on his friends list.

“I don’t know,” Tang Yao replied, sounding just as confused. When he tried sending Nie Yan a message just now, he got a system prompt telling him that the player wasn’t on the same map. Could Nie Yan have gone to a map that was inaccessible by others?

“Did something happen to Nirvana Flame?” Yao Yao asked worriedly.

“Whatever happened, I’m sure he can deal with it. C’mon, let’s continue.” Tang Yao’s confidence in Nie Yan almost resembled blind faith.

The Viridian Empire was a large, stand-alone map comprised of numerous and various zones. Players could whisper each other as long they were within the same map, but they weren’t able to make contact with players from different maps such as the Satleen Empire or the neutral territory of the giants. If Tang Yao couldn’t get a hold of him, then that meant Nie Yan wasn’t in the Viridian Empire right now. But how was that possible? The empire was vast and boundless and spanned at least several hundreds of miles across. Because they were still in the central area of the map, leaving its borders would still require five days or more, even with the fastest running speed! The other way was to teleport, but the only place in the entire empire with a transfer point connecting to the Satleen Empire was Calore.

Although his sudden disappearance left the group perplexed, they could only suppress their doubts for the time being. Right now, their main priority was clearing their red names. With the slight increase in damage output after reaching Level 18, Tang Yao felt confident in moving on to stronger mobs. So he took out the list of coordinates Nie Yan had given him the day before. After which they set out in search of Elite Scaled Frogs.

...

Not knowing how much time had passed, Nie Yan slowly regained consciousness. He was currently lying on the ground. A pitter-pattering sound gradually grew more audible as he felt raindrops hit his face, carrying a chill that seemed to pierce through his skin.

A certain thought jolted him into sobriety as he quickly sat up and rummaged through his bag. After seeing that the Chapter of Courage and Chapter of Freedom were still there, he let out a sigh of relief.

You've discovered the Illusory Realm of the Dullahans.

When he saw the system message, he understood that he was in an instanced quest map.

He found himself in a vast region of wilderness. The sky above him was dark and gloomy. A constant drizzle fell to the earth, and

the wind whistled loudly, carrying an otherworldly chill.

After surveying around, Nie Yan noticed this was a sealed off area. He wouldn't be able to use a Return Scroll to leave.

There were several knights riding ghastly, skeletal war-horses roaming around the wilderness. They wore full suits of black armour and carried three-meter long pikes. However, what stood out the most... was the fact that they lacked heads!

Nie Yan entered stealth before slowly approaching one of them.

Headless Horseman (Undead): Level 30
Health: 1,200/1,200

Task 1 – Kill 20 Headless Horsemen

I wonder what happens if I die here on this map... Either way, I don't want to find out, but these Headless Horsemen aren't going to be easy to deal with. With his current strength, slaying a monster so far above his level was truly too difficult of a task.

He opened the official website to search for information regarding these Headless Horsemen, but to his dismay, nothing came up. He let out a dejected sigh. For now, he had no choice but

to drop the matter and figure out a way himself.

Since his own stats were severely lacking, he could only try to figure out the monster's weak point.

After thinking for a bit, he decided to probe things out. He first approached within 70 meters of a Headless Horseman, then took out his crossbow. Employing the same method he had used back at Agmota Muddy Wetlands, he would fire at the ground near the Headless Horseman to see whether or not it would be alerted. In this way, he would be able to figure out its aggro range.

After observing the Headless Horseman for a while, he noticed its movements were actually pretty clumsy, especially when trying to turn.

「Whoosh-whoosh-whoosh!」Three crossbow bolts struck the ground within 30 meters of the Headless Horseman. It suddenly reacted, prompting its skeletal horse to charge 20 meters toward the direction of the sound. Its powerful charging speed kicked up a whirlwind of dust.

This bastard's explosive speed is at least 120 or higher!

Who knew this clumsy monster would actually charge at such speed upon discovering an enemy!

Nie Yan nearly jumped up in fright. He quickly activated Swift Retreat and withdrew far into the distance.

With an aggro range of about 35 meters and a charge speed of 120, Headless Horsemen definitely weren't the kind of monster he could take on in a direct confrontation at his current level!

He stared at the Headless Horseman from afar, growing increasingly vexed. The faster the enemy's charge, the more bonus damage it would deal. With the Headless Horseman being so far above his level, if it discovered him, then there was a chance that he would be taken out in a single hit!

After failing to discover an enemy, the Headless Horseman stood in place for a moment before urging its horse to turn back. As an undead, their joints were extremely stiff. Therefore, when turning around, their movements were slow and difficult.

Seeing the Headless Horseman struggling to turn, Nie Yan suddenly had an idea. He circled behind it and used the same method as before to probe it out.

After ten minutes of firing bolts to figure out what the Headless Horseman's aggro range was from behind, he was finally able to confirm that it was only about 3 to 4 meters, far less than was it was from the front. Moreover, even if he alerted it from behind, it would take ages for it to turn its horse around to face him.

Nie Yan faintly smiled. Now this would be much easier to deal with. Propping up the crossbow in his hand, he fired at the Headless Horseman.

「Put-put-put!」The three bolts struck the Headless Horseman.

-26, -29, -31 Three damage values floated up above its head

Upon being attacked from behind, the Headless Horsemen urged its horse to turn around.

Seeing this, Nie Yan naturally wouldn't stay motionless. He constantly circled around it, mirroring its movements as he shot it from behind.

No matter how the Headless Horseman moved, it was unable to turn to directly face Nie Yan. All it could do was continuously turn in place. From beginning to end, it was never able to discover Nie Yan's position. With its low intelligence, it simply had no idea how to respond!

「Put-put-put! Put-put-put!」Nie Yan fired an unending stream of bolts at the Headless Horseman. The continuous damage caused its health to rapidly fall. Three minutes later, it finally collapsed to the ground.

Task 1 – Kill 20 Headless Horsemen. (Progress: 1/20)

Perfect! Nie Yan walked up to collect the items that the Headless Horseman dropped, 2 silver and a damaged blueprint which was filled with various diagrams.

Dullahan Cavalry Crossbow Blueprint: Pieces: 1/10

Requirements: Advanced Blacksmith

Dullahan Cavalry Crossbow (Sub-Legendary)

Requirements: 800 Strength

Properties: Attack 307–327, 30% Critical Rate, +100 Fire Damage, 5-Shot Burst

Weight: 56 lb

Restrictions: Thief, Paladin, Warrior

I never thought it would be a Sub-Legendary weapon blueprint. The properties are amazing! Nie Yan inwardly exclaimed. However, the 56 lb weight and 800 Strength requirement were really quite intimidating. He probably wouldn't be able to equip it until around Level 60–70.

So if I collect all ten pieces, I'll be able to craft a Sub-Legendary cavalry crossbow?

He examined the materials required to create it: 10 top-quality Magic Redwood Logs, 3 top-quality Fire Source Crystals, 3 Enchanted Blackvein Gold, 3 Enchanted Runestones, and 1 Fire Essence Extract.

Seeing the materials listed, Nie Yan was left speechless. Top-quality Magic Redwood Logs and Fire Source Crystals were a bit easier to find, but they were expensive because they were treasured

materials. As for Enchanted Black Rune Gold, Enchanted Runestones—or any materials that had the word “Enchanted,” in the prefix of its name for that matter—were extremely hard to come by. As for Fire Essence Extract, it was an item of legends. In any case, in his past life, he had never come across it in any which way.

Even if he was able to find all the materials required to craft this Dullahan Cavalry Crossbow, he wouldn't be able to equip it at his current level. Nevertheless, he could collect all the blueprint pieces right now, then figure out a way to craft it later on.

Chapter 164 – Undead Slayer

Nie Yan felt bewildered after taking a look at the system notifications. He hadn't receive the slightest bit of experience for killing the Headless Horseman.

Monsters on this map don't give experience...?

While he was pondering over this problem, he happened to glance at the quest bar positioned at the corner of his vision. I should focus on completing the quest first. Who knows... there might be some sort of reward at the end.

After grasping hold of a suitable strategy, slaying Headless Horsemen became as easy as one-two-three. Without receiving even so much as a scratch, they fell victim to the constant line of bolts firing from his crossbow in quick succession.

About an hour later, he checked his quest bar again.

Task 1 – Kill 20 Headless Horsemen (Progress: 16/20)

From the bodies of these Headless Horsemen he had also managed to pick up two more blueprint pieces. Considering they were for a Sub-Legendary Crossbow, the drop rate wasn't all that bad. At the very least, he saw hope of completing the full blueprint.

Eventually, after grinding them for so long, Nie Yan had grown confident enough to make an attempt at controlling one with Undead Rite.

After figuring out their weakness, he had already confirmed he was in no danger so long as he stayed behind them, giving him a sense of reassurance as he boldly cast the spell.

Undead Rite's success rate might be a little low, but inevitably there'd come a moment when it would work. Following repeated failures, he eventually prevailed in assembling a full party of five Headless Horsemen, whereupon he directed his minions to attack any monster wandering about, thus improving his mobbing speed significantly. Not much later, he cleared the quest.

Task 1 complete! You have received the Junior Undead Slayer title.

Task 2 – Kill 200 Headless Horsemen

Nie Yan gazed at the new title which had appeared in his status bar. It would increase his Influence by 1 in all human nations.

Every player could receive numerous titles. Among them were titles such as Great Thief, Shadow Dancer, Divine Priest, and so

on... which were class-related titles, but there were some special titles as well. Believer of the Holy or Undead Slayer, the title he had just received, were part of the latter category. Each title gave special property bonuses. For example, Undead Slayer raised Influence... not a bad reward, especially considering how widespread humans were across the continent, so even the slightest boost in Influence would come in quite handy later on.

After clearing Treant Forest and purchasing so much property in the city, plus gaining a certain amount from establishing a guild as well, Nie Yan's Influence in Calore had already reached 19. Now, with the additional point from this new title, it had risen to 20.

Raising Influence in a city was very difficult. Doing it in towns and villages was relatively easier in comparison. As for entire nations, he had only done so once in his past life, and that was when he received the title of Great Thief which gave him an additional 5 Influence in all human nations. The title naturally held other benefits, but nevertheless, he never expected the Undead Slayer title to similarly increase his Influence in all human nations as well.

After checking the next quest, Nie Yan didn't expect it to still be making him kill Headless Horsemen. Moreover, the amount required this time was ten times more than the last. This quest line was really strange...

However, with the aid of his five minions, he was killing Headless Horsemen at a much faster pace than before. He continued doing this quest because he wanted to see what sort of rewards lay ahead.

After a long time, he finally gathered all ten pieces of the Dullahan Cavalry Crossbow Blueprint. They emitted a dazzling light in the palm of his hands before slowly merging into an intact blueprint. This was a heavy crossbow. If he didn't have enough Strength, then it would be truly difficult for him to even lift it up. Not to mention, with how much it weighed, it would dramatically reduce his movement speed while equipped which was why he couldn't carry it with him at all times. He would have to keep it in his bag and only take it out when absolutely necessary. That was probably the most sensible method of handling it.

Storing away the blueprint in his bag, he checked the rest of the harvest he obtained since entering this realm. Outside of a few pieces of Level 30 equipment, he also found three more equipment blueprints, two of which were Bronze-grade while the other was Silver-grade. The drop rates of blueprints were rather low, making each one found very valuable. Especially considering there was a huge market for Bronze and Silver-grade equipment among ordinary players. After all, they couldn't afford Gold-grade equipment, so they had to get by with equipment of lower grade. In the future, if he opened an equipment shop and hired a few Advanced Blacksmiths and Advanced Tailors, then he would be able to craft the weapons and armour from these blueprints. Since their properties were pretty good, they would be able to earn him quite some gold.

The equipment drop rate here was rather high. In Nie Yan's eyes, these drops were basically sparkling mounds of gold!

In the future, aside from a potion shop, other business, such as an equipment shop, were also necessary to thrive. As commerce in

the game grew even more prosperous, achieving market dominance like he was doing right now would be much more difficult. However, as long as he secured a good chunk of the market, he would still be able to earn a lot of gold, and he could already start slowly preparing now.

When he spotted another Headless Horseman, he would order his five minions to surround and attack it. After it was killed, he would search for his next target.

About two hours later, he cleared the second quest.

Task 2 complete! You have received the Intermediate Undead Slayer title.

He checked the property bonuses of this title. It increased Influence in all human nations by 2!

He didn't think it would still raise his Influence. With more Influence, he would receive better benefits when expanding into other cities and taking on quests in the future.

Task 3 – Kill 2,000 Headless Horsemen

This quest line was starting to become more and more frightening. However, for the sake of finding out what the reward

was at the end, he decided to persevere through.

As he explored further into the map, he gradually discovered that this Illusory Realm of the Dullahans was far more vast than he originally imagined. It could even be described as vast and boundless. After walking in a straight line for several hours, there was still no end in sight.

After three hours or so, Nie Yan spotted a shrine in the distance. It was extremely wide and quite imposing, and with its lofty pillars towering high, it resembled a Greek temple. He observed this place. His eyes first fell on the carvings of lions that covered the pillars. Then, he looked at the flight of stairs that led to the main hall. The entrance to this main hall was sealed off by tall, six-meter high metal gates. Even though they were corroded and rusted over time, they were still awe-inspiring to behold.

Lingering just outside the shrine entrance, there were at least several hundred Headless Horsemen in full suits of black armour guarding the gates.

Despite being awfully curious about what was inside, he didn't dare to take any risks. Making a detour around it, he proceeded to safely hunt the Headless Horsemen nearby. Even though they didn't give any experience, the items they dropped were quite decent and somewhat made up for it.

The only thing confusing him somewhat was that despite him killing countless Headless Horsemen his PKer status seemed to go down extremely slowly. In fact, he hadn't even seen it budge in the longest time.

This map was seriously odd.

When server closing time approached, a bag dropped after he killed a mob. At the time it appeared, he didn't think much of it, but when he finally took a look, he was surprised to discover that it was actually a 32-slot bag.

Magic Rune Bag: 32 slots

In other places, even an ordinary 24-slot bag was quite hard to come by. A 28-slot bag was even more uncommon. He never thought he would actually obtain a 32-slot bag here. Even at Level 40–50, they were quite expensive. At present, the first of them had yet to appear on the marketplace.

After sorting out his items, he swapped out one of his 20-slot bags for the 32-slot bag which immediately opened up a lot of space in his inventory. If he found more Magic Rune Bags, he could increase his inventory space even further!

Since he obtained a Magic Rune Bag from them, it meant these Headless Horsemen had a certain chance of dropping it.

Maybe he'd be able to find a second. He felt even more of an incentive to grind them now. If he had five 32-slot bags, then he wouldn't have to swap them out even after reaching Level 50–60. Every time he set out on an adventure, he'd be able to stock up on

even more things, so he could avoid wasting his time on making return trips to the city.

While Nie Yan was farming Headless Horsemen, a huge disturbance was happening back outside.

Tang Yao had hit Level 18 and was fast approaching Level 19. Heaven Breaker didn't relax either as he ascended to Level 17. Sleepy Fox and his group weren't willing to fall behind either, so they were quietly levelling away as well.

"Why hasn't Big Bro Nirvana Flame returned yet?" Sun asked worriedly.

"He should still be in the game. The fact that he hasn't died and returned to the city means that he's safe for now. No need to worry too much," Tang Yao replied. Although he himself was a little worried, he didn't reveal it on the surface.

Yao Yao would send Nie Yan a few messages every now and then, but she would never get a reply.

Elite after Elite fell by Tang Yao's hands, but the Killer's Demonic Medallion never dropped. Nevertheless, his experience was soaring madly. The three of them were quickly levelling up as their red names gradually cleared. Because Tang Yao refused to relax for even a moment, their supply of Smoke Powder quickly ran dry. So he ordered Sun to make a run to the Starry Night Potion Shop to get a loan. When he pooled enough money to buy some more, they would decide what to do from there.

Nie Yan had already mentioned to Bird that if Tang Yao should ever ask to borrow money, then Bird should promptly lend it. After all, considering how many Intermediate recipes the Starry Night Potion Shop had received from Tang Yao alone, the value of his contributions far surpassed what little amount he was withdrawing. Sun had also deposited all the equipment they had obtained from the Sub-Elites and Elites into the guild treasury. After which he headed over to restock on the party's consumables.

Scarlet Dream Forest was the spawn zone of Level 20 Dodos. A few days prior, there actually weren't many players here, but recently, the area was bustling with eighty or so Victorious Return players.

Heaven Breaker had a difficult time trying to gather a dozen Mages who had small-scale, area of effect spells, but his efforts were rewarded as the mobbing efficiency of his group improved greatly.

Around thirty Thieves were shuttling through this forest, pulling groups of Dodos into an opening between the trees. After which the Mages would cast their area of effect magic. As the spells fell over the area, an endless stream of damage values rose up into the sky. Area of effect spells were extremely mana intensive, so their mana wouldn't be able to hold on for long. For this reason, behind them, a huge group of Holy Mages walked up. They were responsible for transferring mana over to the Mages who were dealing damage, ensuring that their mana bars were always topped up. If they were still running low, then they would drink a mana potion!

With a dozen or so area of effect spells layered over one another, groups of Dodos collapsed to the ground one after another while Heaven Breaker's experience bar was rapidly filling up. Thus, his levelling speed couldn't be considered slow either. He was actually managing to keep pace with Tang Yao. In fact, he was almost right on his heels.

As for Sleepy Fox and his group, they had also found a method of levelling up that was relatively quick. With their frantic levelling, they rapidly surged upward on the leaderboards from the lower ranks. However, from beginning to end, no one was ever able to shake Tang Yao's throne on first place.

Chapter 165 – Demon Hunter

Nie Yan grinded Headless Horsemen for the entire day. Failing to complete Task 3 by the time server closing approached, he began musing to himself about how he was going to leave. Should I let myself die to see if I get teleported out...? Maybe the key to getting out is in that shrine I saw earlier. But if I try to barge in there with my current strength, I'm practically asking for a death wish...

Without being able to come up with a solution, he decided to put off such thoughts for later and logged off with a dejected sigh.

Shortly after taking off the game helmet, the house phone rang.

「Hey, you finally answered your phone! I've been trying to reach you for ages. You punk, where the hell did you go off to? How come I can't get in touch with you inside the game?」Tang Yao anxiously asked.

「I ran into some trouble, ended up getting sucked into a special map.」

「No wonder we couldn't reach you! Is it dangerous?」

「I'm fine for now. I just don't know how to get out.」

「Ah, I see... It's good that you're not in any danger though. It'd suck pretty bad if you died with your name still being red... By the way, Heaven Breaker's already Level 17. That guy's really going at

it, trying to overtake me on the leaderboards.」

「Hmm... he's levelling up pretty fast, but for the time being, he still won't be able to catch up to you.」

「I know, but who knows if that'll be the case later on. It's really tough levelling without the support of my Arcane Fairy...」Tang Yao said rather dejectedly. Heaven Breaker's perseverance truly was worthy of praise. At the same time, without his Arcane Fairy, his levelling speed had indeed slowed quite considerably. He couldn't say for sure Heaven Breaker wouldn't reclaim his throne some day.

「Have you found a Killer's Demonic Medallion yet?」Nie Yan suddenly asked.

「Nope, still haven't...」Tang Yao let out a disappointed sigh.

Nie Yan wrinkled his brows. Tang Yao's name was already so red that it definitely passed the threshold. He had to be seriously down on his luck if he still wasn't able to find one.「Well... just keep soldiering on. It's not that big of a deal if Heaven Breaker passes you. Everyone expects it since he's the guild leader of Victorious Return. Besides, even if he takes first place from you, we can just snatch it back later on.」

A flash of determination swept across Tang Yao's face. Clenching his fist, he said「No! I won't give him the chance! I don't care through what method, but I won't be going down without a fight! I'll make him suffer for sure. A real man always takes his revenge!」

It seemed Tang Yao still felt quite a bit of resentment toward Heaven Breaker for the ambush which led to his Arcane Fairy perishing.

Tang Yao's outburst reminded Nie Yan of the past. Back when they were in middle school, he and Tang Yao had been stopped by a bully outside the school gate and beaten up. Later on, Tang Yao had found that bully and returned the beating several fold. From that day forward, the bully didn't dare to trouble them again. The teachers at school taught students to requite grievances with kindness and tolerance. However, ever since he was small, Tang Yao's father told him that teaching was wrong. "If you suffer any injustices, you'll have to rely on your own ability to claim retribution. They teach you how to behave with integrity, but I'm teaching you how to survive! It's not a matter of who's in the right or who's in the wrong. Because in the real world, those beliefs are as flimsy as the paper you and I write on!" he would always say.

As a result, Tang Yao grew up to be a petty and vengeful person down to the core of his being. Of course, that was only towards the people he disliked.

「Before Level 25, you shouldn't encounter any problems preserving your lead, so you can keep training on Scaled Frogs for a while longer. Anyways, just wait for me to get out,」Nie Yan said. There were a myriad of things he couldn't do while stuck inside this quest map.

「Well, alright then... Try to find a way out quickly. I think I'll be around Level 23 or 24, maybe even a little higher, by the time I fully clear my red name,」Tang Yao said. He had really killed way

too many players.

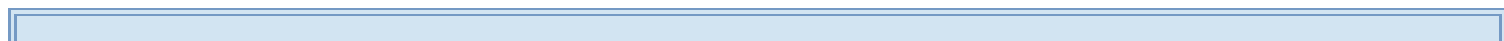
「I'd say around Level 26 or 27 is more likely and that's assuming you're training efficiently.」Nie Yan gave his own assessment. With a kill count of nearly a hundred, Tang Yao's red name was truly rather difficult to clear. Few players could achieve something similar so early on in the game. In the future, Mages would have much more powerful group target spells. Some would even be able to wipe out hundreds of enemies in a single siege. Generally, such players wouldn't be able to clear their PKer status effect before getting into another battle, so their names were constantly shifting between different shades of red. Regardless, so long as they possessed enough Influence, they would be able to walk freely in any city, town, or village.

He spoke with Tang Yao a while longer before hanging up the phone.

Soon, another day quietly passed by, and as the clock struck five, he put back on his game helmet.

After returning to the game, he proceeded to complete Task 3, whereupon he received the Advanced Undead Slayer title. It raised his Influence in all human nations by 5. Although the reward was great, he was already going half-insane from mindlessly killing Headless Horsemen for the second day in a row.

What drove him even madder was that he received yet another quest.



Task 4 – Kill 6,000 Headless Horsemen

As if he were stuck in a never ending nightmare counting twisted sheep, Nie Yan was on the brink of a mental breakdown from seeing Headless Horsemen every waking hour of the game.

He had toyed with the idea of just killing himself to return home many times. If an ordinary player were stuck in his circumstances, then they would have chosen to commit suicide long ago rather than continue on with this quest line. You couldn't even level on this map! Oh, how he wished he could just die. He'd gladly accept the experience penalty. At least he'd be able to make appreciable progress after recouping his losses.

But, he couldn't. Even if this was a quest map, he wasn't confident his Chapter of Courage and Chapter of Freedom wouldn't drop upon death.

As for the affairs that required his attention in the Viridian Empire, he was able to convey them through Tang Yao. And so, everything was progressing smoothly. Hence, there wasn't much to worry about.

Another two days passed by before Nie Yan finally managed to complete Task 4 which gave him the Junior Demon Hunter title as a reward. He examined the title's bonuses.

Junior Demon Hunter – Increase Influence in all human

nations by 8. Reduce the stats of every creature of darkness within 5 meters of the player by 10%.

What a terrifying title!

Aside from the Influence boost, the debuffing aura that reduced the stats of all creatures of darkness around him was beyond amazing!

In regard to his future growth, two days of his time for the Junior Demon Hunter title was certainly well worth the trade.

However, no matter how much better the bonuses of this title were, Nie Yan could only remain speechless as he had received yet another quest.

Task 5 – Kill 12,000 Headless Horsemen

Although the Junior Demon Hunter title would make mobbing a bit faster for him, 12,000 Headless Horsemen was no small number. If they were ordinary Level 30 mobs, the experience he'd receive would bring him directly from Level 17 to Level 25!

He checked the leaderboards. Tang Yao was Level 23; Heaven Breaker was Level 22; and the rest were all around Level 20. Meanwhile, he was still stagnating at Level 17.

Even though he wasn't progressing in level, he still had some parts of him that wanted to proceed with this quest line. As long as he could find a way out, overtaking those players at the top of the leaderboards would be a simple task anyway.

He had lingered around the shrine many times over the last several days. On several occasions, he had barely restrained his urge to go in. Even if he died, he'd finally be able to escape this god-forsaken place; however, without fail, the thought of the potential consequences would bring him back to his senses.

When the servers shut down, he took off the game helmet and placed it on his bed. The nonstop grinding over the past few days had left him completely burnt out.

「How come you're still not out?」Tang Yao phoned him again today as he asked in confusion.

「Ugh... Don't bring it up. I think it's gonna be a while before I can actually escape,」Nie Yan gloomily replied. He had vastly underestimated how much time he would be spending on this quest line.

「Just what kind of quest line takes this long to finish...?」Tang Yao said in shock.

「One that makes you go around killing Headless Horsemen nonstop. They're Level 30 undead monsters,」Nie Yan replied. Not knowing how much longer it would take until he could finally

come out, he had no choice but to attempt and finish the quests. 「What's the situation like on the outside?」

「It's not bad. Guo Huai said he's already bought sixteen properties in seven different cities with the money from the Starry Night Potion Shop. They're all places you suggested, but some of them were already taken, so he could only move on. We've also smoothly advanced to a Level 2 guild. As for that elite team of yours, where in the world did you find such amazing players? They cleared ten dungeons in only two days, many of them on Specialist, and at minimum, it would be on Expert. I heard they just beat Medusa's Lair this afternoon. My Lord... are these guys gods!?!」 Tang Yao exclaimed. He was thoroughly amazed by Resplendent Bladelight, Leader Young Seven, and the others.

Nie Yan faintly smiled. 「It's within my expectations.」 Bladelight and Young Seven's gear was already top-notch even among peak experts, to say nothing of their skill. When they were all grouped together, they had the potential to explode forth with devastating might!

Tang Yao began to inform Nie Yan of some of the going-ons in the guild. For example, Bladelight, Young Seven, and the rest of the elite team's achievements weren't immediately revealed to the rest of the guild. As you could well imagine, when it was, it sent waves of shock across the entire guild. Ten dungeons on Specialist or Expert difficulty in only two days, what kind of crazy idea was that!?

Bladelight and the others had no use for most of the equipment they came across during their runs, so they were set aside for the

auxiliary teams like Yu Lan's as well as the decently skilled players Guo Huai had organized together. With this, the auxiliary teams were also developing at a speedy pace.

Asskickers United had grown rapidly since it was established. Even though not everything was perfect, with a true guild treasury already taking shape, the Starry Night Potion Shop as a backer, and the incredible performance of the elite team... the players became even more profoundly aware of just how much potential this guild had. Those who were already members all called out to their friends, trying to get them to join. So when the guild advanced to Level 2, allowing space for more members, there was another wave of players lining up at the headquarters.

Asskickers United showing great momentum, along with the knowledge that they were working together with Holy Empire, left Victorious Return and Radiant Sacred Flame feeling extremely restless. Hence, some minor friction was bound to occur.

On Wednesday afternoon, several Asskickers United players levelling in the wilderness were ambushed by a group of Victorious Return players and sent back to respawn at the Calore graveyard. After which those Victorious Return players began bragging that sooner or later Asskickers United would be crushed.

On Thursday, Asskickers United players were being harassed in various places. By the end of the day, more than sixty members had died.

On Friday, the harassment continued. The accumulated deaths over the course of that day exceeded one hundred.

Although the members of Asskickers United were fuming, Guo Huai managed to temporarily quell their anger. At such times, they had to remember Victorious Return's status as the number one guild of Calore. For now, Asskickers United simply couldn't afford to provoke them too much. After all, if a large-scale guild war broke out, they were certain to get the worst of it. Besides, with Holy Empire placing their own interests first, they wouldn't necessarily be willing to enter the fray. Guo Huai warned all guild members, while they weren't strong enough yet, they would have to silently endure. He even advised them to hide their guild emblems when they were levelling outside. However, some foolhardy members, who felt a sense of belonging to the guild, would proudly wear their emblems anyway, resulting in them being ambushed by Victorious Return players. However, they would at least take out a few with them before they died.

The frequent conflicts gave rise to huge tensions, as if they were building up to something major. Victorious Return and Radiant Sacred Flame were already itching for a full-scale war. Given the chance, they absolutely wouldn't miss the opportunity to deal Asskickers United a fatal blow.

As for Nie Yan, he was still stuck inside that quest map. He exerted all his effort in killing Headless Horsemen. He didn't receive any experience, nor was he able to reduce his red name. The only consolation was that he was getting decent item drops.

Chapter 166 – Intermediate Demon Hunter

As per his usual routine, Nie Yan took off the game helmet, went downstairs to the kitchen where he grabbed a tube of nutrition tonic, and then headed back to his room to start his morning workout. He had just begun walking up the stairs when he heard knocking on his front door.

Wondering who would come by so early in the morning, he went to answer the door, whereupon he was greeted by a pair of familiar faces. It was his mother and father!

His father very much resembled himself. Yet despite only being in his forties, his hair was already streaked with gray. He was dressed in a neatly pressed suit, but his broad shoulders and intimidating stature matched with his stern, clean-cut appearance easily gave away his military background. As for his mother... you could tell she had been quite beautiful in her younger years, but the ravages of time caused wrinkles to appear on the corners of her eyes. However, what had been lost with age was replaced with an elegance and grace that set her apart from those of the lower class, which explained why she was disliked by some of their extended family.

His parents were weary from travel, their faces ashen from fatigue. It appeared as if they hadn't gotten a good night's rest in weeks.

“Mom, Dad...!” Nie Yan's nose turned sour as tears began freely flowing from his eyes. Too many things had happened in his past life that had left him with more than just a few regrets. When he

was finally able to see them again after so many years, he could no longer hold back the flood of emotions.

“Oh, Little Yan... I’m so sorry we left you all alone for so long without even calling!” His mother immediately embraced him, her voice stifled with emotion. They had been compelled by circumstances which had left them with no other choice. “But, we’re finally back...”

“Mom, Dad... It’s fine, I understand. You both came home safely, that’s what matters the most...” Nie Yan replied, sounding all choked up. He was all too aware of the difficulties his parents had braved these past few months. After waking back up in the past, he was no longer that ignorant brat whose selfishness did nothing but cause them misery. Just being able to see them again left him feeling immensely grateful to the heavens.

“Little Yan, you’ve grown up! You’re taller too...” his mother affectionately said.

“Mom, Dad, you both look like you haven’t slept in days. Come in quickly so you can rest!”

His father normally wore a serious and unsmiling expression, but when he witnessed how much his son had matured, he couldn’t help but gaze at him warmly.

“I told you, boys need to learn how to be independent. You coddle him too much. See, in the time we were away, our son has grown up.” His father laughed heartily.

Nie Yan's father was a rigid man who rarely expressed his feelings which led to few words exchanged between father and son. As a result, he had felt distant from his father in the past. However, as he grew older, he came to understand that his father cared for him just as deeply as his mother, only that his love was shown differently.

When noon arrived, his mother was amazed to discover that her son had learned how to cook. The taste of the food was quite good too. It seemed he had indeed grown independent. He even seemed much more confident than before. She felt very gratified to be blessed with such a son.

As everyone enjoyed a peaceful meal, the warm feeling from having his parents back allowed Nie Yan to experience a happiness he hadn't felt in ages, causing a powerful desire to slowly well forth from deep within him. I must acquire enough power to protect my family!

"We should invite Ah Chen over to have a meal with us. He's really done us a favour," his mother suggested. The Ah Chen she spoke of was an older cousin from his father's side. Since childhood, he had always been close to their family. He had even accompanied Nie Yan's parents on their trip.

"Don't be so meddlesome. You saw how reluctant he was at that time to part with his family. Let him spend some time with them," his father chided.

His mother gently laughed in agreement.

“We should probably return the money we borrowed from Luo Ming and the others first thing tomorrow,” his father said. Even though Luo Ming and Nie Yan’s other relatives had no qualms about making things difficult for them when they asked to borrow money, this time around, Nie Yan’s parents had returned home with honour. At long last, they would be able to hold their heads up high. The money earned from smuggling near the border was enough to allow the family to live without worry as well as pay back what they had borrowed. Furthermore, thanks to the many connections he had built up during his time near the border, he would be able to start up his own company soon. The Nie household had a very bright future ahead of them.

“I’ve already paid back the money you borrowed from them,” Nie Yan interjected. His heart brimmed with disdain when he thought of those relatives. From this day forward, he would make sure to sever all connections they had with that part of the family.

“What did you just say...?” his father asked blankly. Nie Yan had paid back the loans in full!?

“When you guys were gone, they banged on our door at least several times a week, hounding me for the money. Without any other option, I could only turn to Tang Yao. He lent me the money to pay them back,” Nie Yan answered in an almost indifferent tone.

「Bang!」

“Lowlives! Luo Ming and the lot... they’ve really fallen to a new low!” Slamming his fist on the table, his father’s expression frosted over. Even though Nie Yan sounded calm when he recounted the events, he could imagine just how many grievances his son had suffered. When they had left him at home, they had done so partially because it was too dangerous to have him by their side, but also to give some assurance that they weren’t running off with the money. Yet while they were away, Luo Ming and the lot actually had the gall to harass their young son who had been left all alone at home—even more so, to the extent where his son had no choice but to turn to his friend for help!? They had crossed the line! Even Buddha’s tolerance could be tested!

His mother was also infuriated. Luo Ming was her big brother. How could he treat his nephew like that!?

“Since you’ve returned all the money, so be it! From now on, we sever all ties with them. Our family no longer has those sorts of relatives! Still, we need to return the money you borrowed from Yao’zi. Find some time when you can invite him over for a meal. We need to thank him properly for extending a helping hand to our family,” his father said apologetically. Thankfully, his son had matured; otherwise, who knows the sort of trauma a fragile child at his age would have suffered. They would have been ridden with a lifetime’s worth of guilt.

“Right, I’ve already given him a phone call. He’ll be coming over tomorrow,” Nie Yan replied. These last few weeks, he had been wondering why Luo Ming and the others were bothering him so much to return the debt, even more than they had in his past life. Perhaps, it had something to do with that woman, Lin Jia,

spreading rumours around town. In any case, the matter had been settled. There was no point in holding onto past grudges. Luo Ming and the others' actions had led to his father directly breaking off all relations with them. If not, those so-called relatives would have attempted to force their grubby hands on his father's company. In that respect, Lin Jia had actually done him a great favour.

"We'll have to invite Old Lin and Old Liu over some time as well. They've also done us a great favour," his father said. It seemed some relatives couldn't even compare to those old comrades whom he had gone through life and death with.

"Yes, we should." His mother nodded.

The family then chatted all the way to evening.

"Mom, Dad, you guys should rest early. Then, you'll have the energy for tomorrow!" Even though he had the experiences of his almost thirty-year-old self, because he was still in his eighteen-year-old body, he had no choice but to play the role of a thoughtful son to please his parents.

"You should get some rest too," said his mother affectionately after kissing his forehead.

Although his father didn't say anything, Nie Yan could tell he was very happy.

Going from the living room back to his own room, Nie Yan

reclined on his bed. With his father and mother back home, he felt very happy. Today was the most peaceful he had ever been since waking up in the past. As he glanced at the game helmet beside him, he knew that there were still many things he had to prepare for in the future. However, so long as everything developed at a steady pace, no matter what, he wouldn't allow the tragedies of his past to befall his family again.

For three days straight, Nie Yan entered the game at night to clear the quest, then visited his parents' friends and other family during the day. After all, people like Luo Ming and the other relatives who hounded him were in the minority. There were still many extended family members who had given a hand when his family was in dire straits. When Tang Yao visited their house for a meal, he was warmly welcomed by Nie Yan's parents. Their family had stayed at Uncle Lin's home for a while and visited his cousin Ah Chen as well.

On the third day, Nie Yan's father nervously began the preparations for his company. He had created those connections with great difficulty. If he didn't hurry up and establish his company, then those connections were very likely to be lost.

Registering a company was never a cumbersome task. With the company registered and staff hired, his father's business was officially off the ground, and it was quite lucrative indeed. There was no need to worry about the market. When the goods were shipped over from foreign countries, they would immediately be sold domestically for a high price. Otherwise, how else would his father have amassed such a massive amount of wealth in the short span of one to two years? Naturally, as the company grew, his father started branching out to more proper business endeavours

to fool people of their dubious origins.

With everything going smoothly on his father's side, Nie Yan could put his mind at ease as he focused his attention solely on the game.

Shortly after logging back on, he checked on his quest progression.

Task 5 – Kill 12,000 Headless Horsemen (Progress: 11,997/12,000)

Nie Yan was only three away from completing the quest. Without batting an eyelid, he continued on the grind since, in any case, he had already grown numb to it.

Three Headless Horsemen later...

Task 5 complete! You have received the Intermediate Demon Hunter title.

Doing these quests was truly a test of willpower. If there was a Task 6, he felt like he'd absolutely lose his mind.

He examined the new title's effect.

Intermediate Demon Hunter – Increase Influence in all human nations by 12. Reduce the stats of every creature of darkness within 10 meters of the player by 20%.

Intimidate: Inflicts the target with fear for 2 seconds. Range: 3 meters.

Deterrence: Disperse all monsters within the surrounding area for 10 minutes. Not valid if the monsters' level exceeds the player's level by over 20.

Even though Intimidate was a short range skill, it was still pretty good. It was perfectly suited for PvP. As for Deterrence, it was also pretty useful when hunting mobs. More importantly, it would allow him to enter that shrine in the center of the map.

Though the Junior Undead Slayer, Intermediate Undead Slayer, and Advanced Undead Slayer titles gave decent effects, they were merely token rewards. It was only when the title changed to Junior Demon Hunter and Intermediate Demon Hunter that the rewards for this quest line were becoming generous!

Nie Yan checked his status page. Adding the 12 points from his new title, his Influence in Calore reached 31. Now, even if he returned to the city with his name still red, he wouldn't be attacked by the guards!

While he was inwardly celebrating, he suddenly received a system prompt.

Congratulations on clearing the first five tasks! You have received Strength +10, Dexterity +10, and Intelligence +10.

Task 6 – Kill 50,000 Level 30 or higher Undead Monsters.

Upon reading the second prompt, he nearly had the urge to commit suicide right there and then. However, when he saw the quest wasn't making him kill Headless Horsemen, he breathed out a sigh of relief. This quest only required him to kill 50,000 Level 30 or higher Undead Monsters. It didn't necessarily mean he had to complete it here. He could finish it anywhere outside as well. He felt curious as to what sort of effects the Advanced Demon Hunter title had... or if that was even the end. Perhaps there were more?

Chapter 167 – Key

Since the Illusory Realm of the Dullahans was a sealed off map, Nie Yan wasn't able to use a Return Scroll to escape. However, now that he had Deterrence, he would finally be able to explore the final unexplored area of the map, the shrine!

He headed toward the majestic, ancient shrine in the distance while accompanied by five Headless Horsemen servants which he had successfully bent to his will not long ago. Arriving at his destination, he spotted the several hundred Headless Horsemen in an orderly formation guarding the gates. If anyone were to approach, they would unhesitatingly charge forward with their lances directed at the intruder.

The firmly-shut, six-meter high gates appeared grand and imposing.

He cast Deterrence as he cautiously approached the group of Headless Horsemen.

After making contact with this skill's sphere of influence, their skeletal mounts trembled before parting way to either side in quick succession.

The formation was split apart like a wedge being driven into a block of wood, opening up a path that led directly to the shrine. It almost resembled a group of soldiers waiting for inspection.

When he saw Deterrence was effective, he sauntered toward the

entrance while passing through the crowd of Headless Horsemen.

As he walked up, step by step, he saw on both sides of him a dense cluster of menacing lances. The aura they gave off was thick with murderous intent.

As he ascended the stairs, his five servants followed closely from behind.

Arriving at the entrance, he felt a heavy pressure bearing down on him from the towering gates. He placed both hands on their cold, metal surface and pushed forward.「CREAAAK!」A groaning sound echoed out as they slowly gave way, allowing for light to flood into the shrine, illuminating the stifling darkness inside.

You've discovered the Shrine of Dulla.

To his knowledge, such a being didn't exist at all in the annals of Atlanta's history. Just who or what was Dulla... perhaps a deity of an uncommon race worshipped by a small tribe? Either way, he wasn't going to find an answer by just standing around.

With a sense of curiosity, he walked forward into the shrine where he was greeted by an incomparably spacious hall, lined with white stone slabs on which were engraved ornate patterns. It was strikingly vast, covering an area of about 250,000 square meters which could even accommodate a hundred-knight unit holding drill practice indoors. In the center was a towering pillar that

would take three grown men to wrap their arms around. It was so tall the top couldn't be seen, almost as if it were extending into an endless void.

He strolled toward the central pillar with his five ghastly servants in tow. The only audible sound in the empty hall was their footsteps, echoing into the empty space. Directly ahead was an altar on which were rows of candles, emitting a pale, yellow glow, their flames swaying gently as if they would flicker out of existence at any moment.

Along the way, he noticed a bookshelf beside a nearby column holding thick books. The covers were bound with leather hide and embellished gold leaf, but after the passage of several centuries, they became drab and covered in dust. A few were written in the human language, containing titles such as, "Proof of Sir Dulla's Guilt," "The Tale of Sir Dulla," and so on... while two others were written in an unknown language.

You have uncovered lost records left behind from the ancient Era of Shared Governance. They tell the tale of the famed knight, Sir Dulla.

Removing "Proof of Sir Dulla's Guilt" from the shelf, he slowly flipped over to a random passage.

"Sir Dulla, do you admit your sins? I judge you in the name of God. May the divine light cleanse your corrupted soul..."

“I do not, you may send me to hell to suffer in eternal damnation...”

From what he gathered, Sir Dulla was once a legendary knight of the Viridian Empire. In the war to banish the dark elves, he had braved through many battles, slaying countless foes before he eventually grew weary of the senseless slaughter. During one of his later campaigns, he spared the lives of two young female dark elves. Later on, it was discovered the blood of dragons coursed through his veins which led to him being summarily executed by the Temple of Light. After taking his head, the bishop had then ordered to have it hung over the city gates. However, no one imagined that soon after... his headless body and dead steed would resurrect and subsequently disappear from the temple grounds. From then on, the legend of the Headless Horseman was passed down through the Viridian Empire with many residents reporting sightings of his silhouette roaming the land.

Nie Yan skimmed through many books before arriving at the last two. As he reached out his hand and took one of them from the shelf, a mysterious energy flowed into his body, followed by a series of words appearing in his mind.

“Sir Dulla, may your soul rest in peace”

– Dark Elf Girl, Sally.

You have learned the dark elf language.

He examined the book's cover. It was a eulogy to appease the restless soul of an undead. He placed it back down after flipping through its contents. It didn't actually hold any real importance, its worth only to expand upon the lore, but he had learned the dark elf language which was a fruitful reward nevertheless.

He then reached out for the other book. When he grabbed hold of it, he felt a bone-chilling coldness run down his spine. It was as if this book contained a powerful aura of death that seemingly wished to devour all life.

You've learned the vanbiya language.

The vanbiya were only a small branch of the undead. They were a group of Necromancers that resided in the Underworld beneath the Viridian Empire. All day long, they slept in gloomy cemeteries that had not the slightest hints of life. They manipulated corpses to spread death and pestilence wherever they passed.

He examined the book.

Sir Dulla's Book of the Dead (Sub-Legendary)

Description: Give tribute to the dead!

Properties: Reduce the stats of all living creatures within 50

meters by 50% (owner included). Players who die within the book's sphere of influence will receive the undead curse (stats -10%) for two days. The owner will also suffer a curse: Strength -2, Physique -2, and Intelligence +10 every 10 days.

The book could be binded after being picked up.

Do you wish to bind this item?

Nie Yan quickly put down the book which was obviously for Necromancers because only they would dare to use such a frightening item. Any Necromancer that became the owner of this book would be walking down an extremely perverse path that would eventually lead them to a very wretched end. Nevertheless, whether or not it could lead to success was very hard to say. The player would lose Strength and Physique every ten days; this definitely wasn't a joking matter, but their Intelligence would rise considerably. There was a chance it could give rise to an abnormal freak.

Although he had learned the vanbiya language, it wasn't of any use to him for the time being. However, that might not be the case later on. Knowing a language of the undead would become very useful if he ever encountered a group of hostile undead.

After putting down Sir Dulla's Book of the Dead, he searched the bookshelf for more books but didn't find anything else. After which he continued toward the altar.

While slowly making his way over, just below the candles, he saw a black box neatly placed on the center of the altar, its surface finely engraved with exceptionally elegant dark elf characters that resembled a line of finely stitched flowers. Illuminated by the pale candlelight, it gave off a fascinating lustre.

What a strange box!

It was as if a mysterious force was beckoning to him to open it.

He ordered one of his servants to step forward and probe the path ahead. After ensuring there was no danger, only then did he cautiously approach. Upon reaching the altar, he carefully opened the box. After a moment of tense silence, he breathed out a sigh of relief. Fortunately, no trap mechanisms were triggered.

Lined with a deep-crimson cloth, the interior housed a dark golden key. Though only the size of a pinky finger, its design was extremely elaborate, engraved with various bewitching patterns that would make a person exclaim in admiration.

It's a key! After seeing it, he immediately thought back to the chest outside!

It was most likely the matching key for the treasure chest!

He stored the key away into his bag. A dark gold treasure chest was an incredibly valuable thing. After all, no matter how bad your

luck was, it would at least contain a Dark Gold-grade item!

Just at this moment, the gates to the shrine were slammed wide open with a thunderous crash. A towering figure in a full suit of black armour entered into the hall on his steed. It was much larger than the ordinary Headless Horsemen. Its enormous, five-meter-long lance emitted a chilling aura of death.

He inspected this figure with Transcendent Insight.

The Headless Horseman, Sir Dulla (Lord): Level 30

Health: 28,000/28,000

Nie Yan drew in a breath of cold air. He had actually encountered a Level 30 Lord in an enclosed building! He would undoubtedly die if he tried facing off against it. He quickly fetched a Return Scroll out of his bag, so he could escape, but to his dismay, he found that the map was still sealed.

Sir Dulla brandished the lance in his hands and charged forward with his steed, radiating a murderous aura.

Against a Sub-Elite, Elite, and Lord-class monster, Deterrence's effect was very limited.

Dammit, I'm done for... He quickly ordered his five servants to rush at Sir Dulla to stop his charge.

He was well aware that his servants were absolutely no match for Sir Dulla, but he hoped they would at least buy him some time. However, just as he was about to make a run for it, bony hands erupted out of the floor and firmly grabbed hold of his legs, rendering him incapable of fleeing.

He struggled furiously, but these bony hands had a tight grip on him, leaving him unable to move an inch.

In the next moment, a scene unfolded which caused him to be overtaken by shock. Sir Dulla passed right through his five servants and continued charging at him unhindered. This was simply too strange. Was it merely an illusion?

Sir Dulla was fast approaching. With a lance pointed directly at him, it seemed he was going to be skewered at any moment.

Are you willing to believe that Sir Dulla was innocent?

Option 1: Yes, Sir Dulla was innocent.

Option 2: I need more information to make a decision.

Option 3: No, even death cannot wipe away Sir Dulla's sins.

Nie Yan didn't need long to think as his keen intuition allowed him to come to a decision within seconds. He chose Option 2. Only it embodied the true intention of Conviction... fairness, honour, freedom, courage, wisdom, and so on.

「Shunk!」Sir Dulla's lance stabbed through his heart as blood splattered everywhere.

Did I make a mistake? Those were his final thoughts before he blacked out.

Not knowing how much time had passed, he awoke in a daze to find that he was laying on the cold stone floor of the shrine ruins. His surroundings were empty and silent. Like he had just come out of a dream, it was as if everything that happened before was never real. Searching through his bag, he breathed a sigh of relief after confirming the Chapter of Courage and Chapter of Freedom were still there. As he checked his status page, he saw the Intermediate Demon Hunter title was there as well. Furthermore, there was a new property, “Just.” Although he didn't know its uses, since it didn't seem to give any stat bonuses, he was sure there was no harm in having it.

It seems Sir Dulla's appearance was just part of the storyline in the quest map....

What made him excited was that he had finally escaped the quest map. He had probably spent six to seven days inside there!

His body felt a little stiff as he crawled back to his feet. Glancing back inside his bag, he spotted the shimmer of a dark golden key!

Chapter 168 – Entering The City With A Red Name

Nie Yan arrived at the hollow tree where he first discovered the dark golden chest. He dropped down to one knee. Absolutely giddy with anticipation, he inserted the key into the chest.

It fit perfectly. As he turned the key, he could feel the complexity of the lock’s internal mechanisms. He feared even a Specialist Key might not be able to open it.

Opening... Estimated Completion: 1%... 10%...

A moment later, the chest opened with a light click.

After rummaging through, he noticed there were quite a few things inside. Indeed, it certainly deserved to be called a treasure chest. He took the items out to examine.

- Fire Essence Extract x3
- Enchanted Blackvein Gold x6
- Enchanted Runestones x6

The three were materials for the Dullahan Cavalry Crossbow which would have taken him ages to gather by himself. He didn't expect to have them handed to him right after leaving the quest map. As for the two other materials required to craft the crossbow, Fire Source Crystals and Magic Redwood Logs... though they were expensive, they weren't particularly hard to find, appearing every now and then in the auction house.

Excluding the materials, he also obtained a gem and a skill book.

Gem of Darkness (9): Socketable Item

Properties: Convert 10% of Attack to Piercing Dark Damage, 1% Defense Ignore, -10% Equipment Requirements

It actually had a quality rating of 9! In the entire game, it was one of the highest quality gems! Nie Yan bitterly chuckled. Although he obtained an incredible gem, he didn't have any pieces of equipment worthy of pairing it with. Socketing it into a low-quality piece was tantamount to throwing a beautiful bouquet of flowers into a pile of cow manure, so only something Sub-Legendary or above was suitable. It seemed he would have to wait until the Dullahan Cavalry Crossbow was successfully crafted.

He examined the skill book. His mind trembled when he read the name. It was actually a Lockpicking skill book, moreover, the best kind—Lockpicking Specialist! It had two special properties: every time he opened a chest, he had a 10% chance of receiving an additional point of proficiency and Ignore Treasure Chest Level +1.

Although Lockpicking Specialist was only at Junior-rank right now, he felt improving its proficiency wouldn't pose a problem. After all, he knew plenty of locations with hidden chests. At worst, he would have to set aside some time for ranking up the skill to ensure that he'd be able to access some of the higher grade chests he wished to open later on.

Nie Yan was finally ready to return to Calore after another search around the isle failed to turn up anything new. His bag was nearly filled to the brim. Were it not for him finding a second Magic Rune Bag, he would have run out of inventory space long ago.

Well, it's time to go back. I should be fine for now... considering my Influence there is over 30.

From his bag, he took out a black garb to hide his appearance. As for his red name... he could only let it be since he had no way of veiling it.

After channeling a Return Scroll, he teleported back to Calore as a flash of light enveloped him.

Back in Calore, the area around the transfer point was full of players setting out to train, waiting for others, or looking to form groups. When Nie Yan stepped out, they all looked at him with sluggish expressions.

“What the hell? Returning with a red name...? Does this guy not want to live anymore? Hey, buddy, if you wanna die just say the

word! I'll gladly send you to the graveyard!"

"Just how many players did he kill? His name's already so red..."

"Is he not afraid of the guards attacking him?"

Everyone cleared a path for him as he passed by, discussing in hushed tones. With his black garb and deep crimson name, he was shrouded in mystery. Though no one could make out his appearance, their first impression of him was that he was extremely dangerous!

When he swept his gaze over the crowd, they felt their hearts tighten and hastily retreated several steps further.

Even though player killing was prohibited in the city, they still felt an oppressive pressure from Nie Yan's red name.

As a squadron of fully equipped city guards in silver armour approached, the players quickly made way for them.

"Look, they've come! That guy's dead for sure..."

The crowd all wore expressions of schadenfreude. They didn't believe for a second that he would be capable of putting up a fight. The city guards were all Level 100 Elites at least. Even the standard equipment assigned to them radiated a frightening aura.

However, what happened next shook the minds of everyone present. Their jaws dropped as they reeled back in shock.

Not only did the guards not attack, their captain even walked forward to greet him quite respectfully.

“Greetings, Sir Demon Hunter,” the guard captain said in a deferential manner.

After nodding his head, Nie Yan no longer paid attention to them. The guards were tasked with maintaining law and order. They had no real influence in Calore, so it was fine to just ignore them.

Brushing past them, he headed directly for the Asskickers United guild headquarters.

Nothing had happened. Surprisingly, the city guards didn’t dare to lay a hand on that red name player. Such a scene practically defied common sense!

“Holy crap... Amazing! Even the guards don’t dare to touch him!”

“He even ignored them! What a god!”

“Look, he’s leaving! Let’s see where he goes!”

“He just entered the Asskickers United guild headquarters! Do

you think he's a member?

“Wow... their guild was only established recently, but I heard their elite team cleared over ten dungeons on Specialist or Expert in only two days. Their guild leader is the top asskicker, first place on the leaderboards, Young Sparrow Hawk! He's even better than Heaven Breaker. Dammit, if I knew earlier, I would have joined their guild when I still had the chance.”

Very soon, a few videos appeared on the official forums with eye-catching titles such as...

「A Red Name Player Enters Calore!」

「Godly Red Name Player Intimidates the City Guards!」

...

Nie Yan gave players a big shock as he passed through the streets. Without fail, all of them retreated a few steps to let him by.

His red name was a powerful deterrent. Only after stepping back did they recall they were in the city! A player like that shouldn't be able to wander freely around here! Logically speaking, they should be dead shortly after stepping out of the transfer point. It never took the city guards more than one hit to slay a red name player!

A while later, he finally arrived at the entrance of the guild headquarters.

“Hey, who’s that guy!? What a badass! He actually has the guts to walk around the city with a red name!”

“Didn’t you see the emblem on his chest? He’s one of us. I think he’s one of our guild heads.”

The nearby guild members conversed quietly, their minds filled with amazement as they followed after him into the building.

Nie Yan’s first stop was the guild treasury. He dumped all the equipment he had obtained from the quest map inside. As for the recipes, he planned to deliver them to the Starry Night Potion Shop.

“You’re finally back... but damn, you nearly gave me a heart attack. How come your red name still isn’t cleared?” Guo Huai exclaimed in amazement.

“Don’t worry. As long as my Influence in Calore is over 30, I’ll be able to freely enter and leave the city,” Nie Yan replied. Seeing a red name player freely walking around blew everyone’s minds. It wouldn’t be until later on, when more players with high Influence emerged, especially after the release of strongholds, that such a sight would become fairly commonplace.

“No wonder you dared to return...” Guo Huai said, suddenly understanding.

“How are things right now?”

“It’s going good. We’re already 30,000 strong. The largest guild in Calore, Victorious Return, only has 80,000 members, so we’re quickly catching up. Of course, their requirements for joining are a lot more stringent, so the quality of their players is much higher than ours.”

Every guild had certain size limits. A Level 2 guild had a limit of 50,000 members. A Level 3 guild had a limit of 100,000 members. As a guild grew larger, the requirements for joining rose accordingly. Recruiting too many low-level members wasn’t an efficient use of the guild’s open spaces. It would place too heavy of a burden on the guild’s resources... to the extent that it would even eat away at the benefits of the stronger members.

“I see, we should probably raise our recruitment criteria...”

“Yes, we’re in the middle of discussing that right now. It won’t do if we let people in solely based on their level.” Guo Huai nodded. The recruitment standards definitely needed to be raised. As for the members who barely participated and constantly skipped out on guild activities, they would certainly be given the boot. With this, the overall quality of the guild would improve.

“What about acquiring the properties I asked for?”

“I’ve already helped you purchase thirty-six properties from eleven different cities. All of them are under your name. Really though... if this information ever gets out, I bet it’ll shake the

entire empire. A single person owns more properties than several major guilds combined... even I still have a hard time believing it, and I bought them for you!” Guo Huai said. If those properties were turned into businesses, even if they were merely being rented out, the amount of gold generated would be enough to develop another Holy Empire or Victorious Return.

“Mhm...” Nie Yan didn’t seem all that enthused. “Right now, we’re riding on some good momentum, but we still have to take things a step at a time, and when we do, it’s best they’re planted firmly. So, I hear Victorious Return has been stirring up quite a bit of trouble, huh?”

“In the last week, over three hundred of our members have been killed by those goons at least once. They’re paying pretty close attention to us. Some of our players are being surrounded as soon as they leave the city walls, even if their guild emblems are concealed. That means moles from Victorious Return have infiltrated our ranks. A few days ago, I managed to weed some out, but who knows how many more are still hiding,” Guo Huai explained, sounding incredibly aggrieved. The matter was giving him a huge headache. If it wasn’t sorted out properly, he feared it would lead to members leaving.

Right now, everyone was optimistic about the guild’s future. So even when hundreds of players were being harassed and killed, they were still willing to stay. But that might not always be the case. If they didn’t deal with the problem soon, it would grow into something much more serious.

“If they want to suppress us, we won’t simply have to grin and

bear it! If they kill our people, then we'll just have to return the favour. At the very least, we can't make them think that we're pushovers. We also have to enact some countermeasures. Tell our members not to let others know where they're levelling. That way, with the map being so big, Victorious Return won't necessarily be able to find them," Nie Yan replied. This was the only way. Otherwise, if they continued to let Victorious Return walk all over them, sooner or later, Asskickers United would be harassed into the ground.

"But they're too big. I'm afraid we won't outlast them!"

"I've already thought of a plan," Nie Yan said. He recalled a certain famous player organization in the previous timeline, the Union of Assassins. It probably wasn't established yet. With such an organization acting in the shadows, if he made a name there, so long as he was willing to spend a little money, he'd be able to give Victorious Return's players a huge headache.

Chapter 169 – Union Of Assassins

In the previous timeline, the Union of Assassins was an organization of professional players established by several famous figures. Its area of operations covered the Viridian and Satreen Empires. Its members included six Shadow Dancers, eight Guardian Paladins, eight Dark Berserkers, five Magisters, and more. It was fairly large with over 6,000 members, almost all of whom were elite experts. The members of the union ranged from guild leaders and top-ranking figures from major guilds to even solo players. Both enemies or allies ended up joining. As long as a player met the requirements of the Union, they were more than welcome.

The Union of Assassins was much more flexible than a guild. It wasn't created to struggle for power in the game but as an additional source of income for professional players. Members could become an agent or a client. Anyone could become an agent, provided they accumulated 60,000 points and paid a membership fee. Agents who were more valuable to the union, like a Great Thief or Shadow Dancer, were eligible for a fixed salary. Of course, that meant they had to accept a mission at least every other week.

As for clients, they issued requests for the agents to complete. Requests could only be issued after putting down a security deposit, which corresponded with the quality of agents available for that request. If a client paid a large enough security deposit, they could even get Shadow Dancers, Guardian Paladins, or other equally powerful players to throw their lives away for them. Clients were differentiated by order of nobility: baron, viscount, earl, marquis, and duke.

In the Union of Assassins' heyday, receiving the lowest ranking title of baron required a person to donate at least several tens of thousands of yuan. The amount required to receive the highest ranking title, duke, was simply unimaginable. Because at that rank, the client would be able to commission the likes of Shadow Dancers. The Union of Assassins accepted both real life money and in-game gold as forms of payment.

An entity like the Union of Assassins would inevitably appear again in the future. So why not take advantage of the situation and establish such a powerful organization for himself?

For operations to run smoothly, the Union of Assassins had to be flexible. Even if an enemy wished to join as a client or agent, they couldn't be refused. It was important to preserve the neutrality of the union, along with the ideal of absolute fairness. No restrictions could be placed on agents or clients. They were completely free to issue and accept requests according to their desires. However, the two parties would never be allowed direct contact, ensuring that the union would be acting as the intermediary in all transactions. This would make sure that the Union always received its share of the earnings.

After some consideration, Nie Yan realized such a grand undertaking would require the coordination of multiple people. Furthermore, these individuals had to have very high prestige among the professional gaming circle! He absolutely couldn't accomplish it by himself. His network of contacts was far from being adequate.

The only suitable candidates that came to mind were Sleepy Fox

and Kill Love. He needed professional players of at least their statuses to make it succeed. In the future, the Union of Assassins would inevitably become a giant money-making machine. If Sleepy Fox and Kill Love agreed to help, they would want a share of those profits. Just thinking about the money he'd have to give up made his heart ache. However, without the cooperation of those two, it was impossible for him to properly establish the union.

He weighed the issue in his mind. If he established the Union of Assassins, he would have full administrator control of all its affairs. He could kick anyone, grant the highest authority, and so on. No one else would have that power. Even if Sleepy Fox and Kill Love took a share of the profits, he wouldn't be losing out on much. In fact, he could even exploit this relationship to bind them closer to him. With that settled in his mind, Nie Yan got to work on establishing the Union of Assassins right away.

The first thing he did was to create a dedicated chat server.

Name: Union of Assassins

Purpose: Connecting clients with requests to professional players.

Leader: Anonymous

Prince: Currently vacant, possesses administrative privileges (5 Max)

He divided membership into clients and agents and created ranks based on the order of feudal nobility, exactly like the previous Union. Once he finished these initial tasks, he sent out invites to

Sleepy Fox and Kill Love. Sleepy Fox was levelling in the wilderness when he suddenly received a notification.

Nirvana Flame has invited you to join Union of Assassins (Special Server). Do you accept?

He was quite puzzled at the sudden invite. Just what in the world is he doing now? Nevertheless, he still pressed confirm and entered the server. In another place, Kill Love received the same notification and also accepted.

Inside the server, three players joined the chat.

Sleepy Fox:「Nirvana Flame, what's this about?」

Kill Love :「Huh?」

Nie Yan faintly smiled, then replied,「You'll know when you read the description.」

With a doubtful gaze, Sleepy Fox read the server's information. After only going through a small section, the Union of Assassins' objective and rules, he soon understood what kind of organization it was.

「It's a good idea,」Kill Love praised.

「Not bad...」Sleepy Fox nodded in approval.

「Right, so you guys should start recruiting,」Nie Yan said. He assigned Sleepy Fox and Kill Love the role of prince.

Sleepy Fox pondered for a moment before asking,「If this union starts generating profit, how are we going to divide it?」Based on his insight, he could tell with a glance just how much influence the Union of Assassins would eventually have and how much revenue it could potentially generate.

Kill Love:「I'm wondering about that too.」

「Make a suggestion,」Nie Yan answered. He had already registered the Union of Assassins' symbol, but if Sleepy Fox and Kill Love decided they wanted to withdraw and establish a similar organization of their own together, there was nothing he could really do about it. However, he was confident the two would weigh the risks and benefits. Surely, it was better to stand united than to fall divided.

「Both Kill Love and I get 20% each. How does that sound?」Sleepy Fox offered, trying to test the waters.

The organization was established by Nie Yan, who invited him to join out of trust. He didn't feel good asking for too much. More importantly, he still wasn't clear on how deep Nie Yan's connections went. His mysterious background always acted as a source of deterrence. Back when Holy Empire was struggling to do

Agmota Muddy Wetlands on Easy and Normal, the team behind Nie Yan had already cleared it on Specialist. His speculation led to a beautiful misunderstanding at the time.

「You and Kill Love get 15% each. Choose a suitable candidate to become a prince, and they'll get 10%. As for how the shares are divided, you guys will have to keep that confidential. Within the server, you'll have to hide your names!」Nie Yan said. Having three big shots in the same place would make sure they would keep each other in check. Eventually, in the future, he could take advantage of the immense benefits from the Union of Assassins to restrict them. If a power decided to withdraw, it wouldn't have much of a negative impact on the organization.

Nie Yan already set down the rules for the Union of Assassins. He could see the names of everyone in the organization. The princes would be able to see the names of all members below them but not each other. Everyone else would remain anonymous to each other. Nie Yan invited Tang Yao and Guo Huai to the server and quickly set their names to hidden. Including these two, the Union of Assassins would have a total of five princes. Sleepy Fox and Kill Love wanted to know the identities of the two new princes.

「Who are they?」

「That's a secret,」Nie Yan replied. He had especially reminded Guo Huai and Tang Yao not to reveal their identities on the server. Sleepy Fox and Kill Love stopped asking about the other two princes. Nie Yan clearly didn't want to reveal that information, and they didn't feel good about pushing for an answer.

「I think we can get Fa Lan to join,」Sleepy Fox suggested. That old man from Sapphire Shrine was an influential figure. His deep network of contacts would be beneficial for the organization's growth. The person being recruited would have to at least be worth the 10% they were given.

「I think so too.」Kill Love nodded.

「I guess it's decided then, Fa Lan it is,」Nie Yan said. Sapphire Shrine's might indeed couldn't be overlooked, especially when they were likely to produce three Magisters in the future. They were an ultimate trump card. Fa Lan was sent an invitation for the Union of Assassins, and he joined the server shortly after. After finding out what the union was all about, he praised them for their creativity. He had great expectations for the future growth of the Union of Assassins.

In the previous timeline, the leader of the Union of Assassins' identity always remained a riddle. The mysterious figure had never divulged his name. Nie Yan decided to follow that example and also keep his identity a secret. Anonymity brought along many advantages, the most important one was avoiding unnecessary trouble. According to the rules of the union, all princes would have to invite a certain number of agents and clients. Sleepy Fox, Kill Love, and Fa Lan all began recruiting people. Under Nie Yan's urging, Guo Huai also began sending out invites to various well-known individuals. One after the other, professional players continuously joined the Union of Assassins.

The chat server rapidly filled up with people. Among them was no lack of famous players. Initially, they were all confused by the

invitation, but they quickly figured out what the purpose of the organization was, followed by a steady stream of praise being issued out. If the Union of Assassins became successful, it would be a huge boon for them. They would get plenty of work without having to look all over for clients themselves.

Sleepy Fox, Kill Love, and the others were well aware that if the Union of Assassins gained a foothold, it would be far more profitable than them starting a gaming organization to accept requests on players' behalf or selling equipment. So they used all of their influence to pull players in. The Union of Assassins' clientele also began growing.

In less than an hour, the number of agents in the Union of Assassins reached over 600, and there were over 100 clients. The first set of requests were placed on the server. They consisted of helping players on quests, killing boss monsters, and so on. If a person wanted a famous player to help them level, the amount of money they needed to pay was quite considerable. If a client made a request, they would have to deposit the money in the Union of Assassins' bank account. When the request was fulfilled and the client was satisfied, the money would be given to the agent. It was equivalent to an online service platform. By fulfilling many requests and earning money for the union, an agent would be able rise up through the ranks and take on more lucrative tasks.

In a short while, the server was bustling with activity. With Sleepy Fox and the others supervising, Nie Yan could simply sit back and relax. Though this was only the beginning, they already recruited so many members. As the business expanded, with its reputation growing accordingly, so would the number of people joining. When the Union of Assassins was fully developed, that was

the time they would be able to swim in piles and piles of gold. Its prospects were very bright.

Chapter 170 – Kill Stealing

After finishing his business with the Union of Assassins, Nie Yan checked the level leaderboards. Currently in first place was Tang Yao at Level 25 followed by Heaven Breaker at Level 24. Although Heaven Breaker was consistently a level behind Tang Yao, the gap between them was actually growing wider.

「Eh, you're out?」Tang Yao sent a message.

「Yep, I'm finally out.」

「Wanna join back up with us to hunt Scaled Frogs?」

「Nah, I've got some stuff to do. Go on without me. Besides, the experience should still be pretty good, even at your level,」Nie Yan replied.

Overtaking the top players on the leaderboards wasn't difficult. It wouldn't make much of a difference if he put off levelling for a few days. Ranking up his Lockpicking Specialist skill would be a better use of his time. Otherwise, he'd be helpless when he encountered a locked chest on higher level maps.

The guild treasury was filled with no less than five hundred pieces of Level 30 equipment. Some of it was from his time in the quest map, but most of them came from Tang Yao and the others who contributed around four hundred pieces of equipment. They had killed several dozen Sub-Elite and Elite Scaled Frogs every single day for the last week or so on a nonstop grind.

The frightening quantity of high-level equipment in the treasury left the guild members speechless! However, they also felt a little depressed. Though it was nice to see so many pieces of high-level equipment, none of them were even close to Level 30, so they wouldn't be able to use all of that equipment for a long time. Plus, there was a severe shortage of low-level equipment in the guild!

「What are you busy with?」Tang Yao blankly asked.

「I found a Lockpicking skill recently, but it's still only at Junior rank. I want to raise it a bit before heading off to a high-level map.」

Nie Yan planned to hop from one place to the next opening chests, mainly to improve his Lockpicking Specialist skill. It would also give him an opportunity to pick up some more low-level equipment for the guild. He felt it was about time he started collecting the other chapters from the Book of Order as well.

「Oh, so it's like that... Alright, I see then.」

「Did you clear your red name yet?」

「Yeah, it's cleared, but I still didn't find a Killer's Demonic Medallion.」

「Really? I guess you're pretty unlucky. So be it then...」

Despite his casual reply to Tang Yao, he was confused that the Killer's Demonic Medallion didn't drop. There was no mistake, he knew for a fact that Scaled Frogs dropped the Killer's Demonic Medallion. Was it possibly due to Tang Yao's red name not being severe enough...? No, that was impossible! He had killed almost a hundred players!

At times, luck came in waves you were helpless to resist. Other times, you could be so down on your luck it was like you were stuck in a deep pit.

Arriving at the Starry Night Potion Shop, Nie Yan upgraded it to a Tier 4 shop. He also found that Bird had hired many Tinkerers, Scroll Makers, Disassemblers, etc. Basically, anyone who had reached the Master rank in their respective crafting profession in the previous timeline was scouted out by the Starry Night Potion Shop. Its formidable financial fortunes swayed the hearts of many. Some of them signed on immediately, while others chose to wait and see. Even though the Starry Night Potion Shop dominated the market for Alchemists, there was no guarantee of similar results in other markets. However, the invitation from the Starry Night Potion Shop did ensure that the ones who didn't join straight away wouldn't rashly accept an offer from another power.

Nie Yan was elated at the rapid expansion of his capital, but he also felt a sense of crisis. All of the properties in several cities had been snatched up. His properties accounted for less than three percent of the purchasable land in the Viridian Empire. Luckily, they were all relatively valuable. If he calculated their worth later on, they could possibly make up around thirty percent of the total value of the empire's real-estate market. Many of his properties had fallen into the hands of the major guilds, top teams, or wealthy

individuals.

However, the most lucrative part of Conviction wasn't in real-estate. No, it laid in the most important military structure that every major power would soon struggle for control over, strongholds! For guilds, a stronghold was equivalent to a base. It also accommodated various business enterprises because ordinary players were allowed to trade inside. Guilds could tax every transaction made within their stronghold. As for management, they could assign housing and various other things to players. As such, many powers would rather focus all their energy on expanding their forces, heavily investing into their guild treasuries, than spend too much resources on purchasing land. Waiting for real-estate to appreciate was a long and slow process. With a powerful force, however, what awaited them in the future would not merely be land but entire cities within strongholds!

Nie Yan sent a message to Guo Huai.

「Did Young Seven and the others get those Unknown Transfer Scrolls I asked for?」

「Yeah, they got two.」

「Good, send them to me through the mail.」

「Alright.」

Nie Yan felt he had way too many things on his plate right now.

Although there was so much he could do as a person who had woken up in the past, he could only focus on a few things at a time while doing his utmost to improve his strength.

After withdrawing the Unknown Transfer Scrolls, he teleported to Link Town. Evading the sight of other players, he exited the town gates. He really wasn't afraid of common players, he just didn't want to deal with the problems caused by someone following him

His destination was a certain cave in the Peaceful Dream Gill, a Level 20 map. The Chapter of Wisdom was inside, guarded by a Hellfire Guard. The Hellfire Guard would fall asleep for two minutes every two hours. He planned to take advantage of that time to get around the guard and snatch the chapter. Two minutes wasn't enough to let him safely evacuate, but by using an Unknown Transfer Scroll, he would be able to immediately escape. The scroll made getting the Chapter of Wisdom much easier.

However, the Chapter of Wisdom was mainly for Mages. The bonuses it gave to them were especially powerful. So it wasn't that useful to Nie Yan. Just like with the Chapter of Courage and the Chapter of Freedom, the former was more suited for Warriors who bravely took up the vanguard, while the latter was more suited for a Thief like him.

The Peaceful Dream Gill was the go-to place for Level 10–20 players to level. Currently, a party of six was grinding mobs there: one Paladin, one Priest, and four Mages.

“Sugar Cane, where do you think our guild leader is levelling?

His levelling really is too fierce. Even Heaven Breaker can't catch up to him. He's actually pulling farther and farther ahead," said a Paladin in silver armour who looked to be around twenty-three years old. At a glance, he gave off a very neat and tidy feeling.

Paladin of the Elegy (Asskickers United): Level 16

Guild Contribution: 800 pts

He was nicknamed Water King because he was the most active in the guild chat. He'd flood the guild chat with messages every day, whenever he got bored. Despite this annoying tendency, he was well-liked by his guildmates, which was why Guo Huai had appointed him as a minor group leader.

"Who in the world knows? Our guild leader really is amazing! I heard Heaven Breaker has over sixty players helping him level. They're casting area-of-effect magic nonstop to hunt mobs. The levelling speed must be extremely fast. Yet they're still not able to beat our guild leader. Heaven Breaker is actually falling behind even more. Our guild leader is a god! Haven't you heard that gods act in mysterious ways? If his secrets were so easily revealed, he wouldn't be our guild leader!" Sugar Cane replied. As a fellow Arcane Mage, he blindly worshiped Tang Yao who was firmly at first place on the leaderboards.

"Let's hurry up and level. When I reach Level 30, I bet I'll be able to get Silver-grade equipment from the guild. If I can raise my merit points a little more, maybe I'll even get Gold-grade equipment. Our guild leader is too awesome! We have a hard time

even getting a hold of Silver-grade equipment. Owning Bronze-grade equipment is decent. Yet he's actually able to find so many pieces of Silver and Gold-grade equipment," Paladin of the Elegy said.

"He definitely has to be hunting Sub-Elites and Elites! Generally, only monsters around that class regularly drop Silver and Gold-grade equipment. If we encounter a Sub-Elite, we won't be able to deal with it. We can only circle around. We can barely handle Leader-class monsters. So of course we only find Bronze-grade equipment." Sugar Cane said. Leader-class monsters only had a small chance of dropping Silver-grade equipment. Even if one did drop, the properties on the equipment wouldn't be all that great. As a result, many players in the guild greatly desired the equipment Tang Yao had obtained. Right now, the entirety of Asskickers United were putting in their greatest effort to level up and earn merit points.

"There's a Leader-class Wild Boar!"

"Paladin, quickly!" Sugar Cane shouted. In the entire party, only Paladin of the Elegy could take on its aggro. Fortunately, the Priest in the team had learned Junior Heal. Along with four Mages, dealing with a leader-class monster wouldn't be a problem.

"Nice!" Paladin of the Elegy gave himself a few buffs before charging in with his sword swinging.

Although Paladins weren't as good as Warriors at tanking damage, they weren't weaker by much! However, their aggro attracting capabilities really fell short in comparison. This was also

why a Paladin would never be able to replace the role of a Warrior in a team.

After what seemed like half a day, Paladin of the Elegy finally firmly secured the Wild Boar's aggro.

“Start casting your spells!”

“Heal!”

These players were gradually whittling away the Wild Boar's health.「Bang! Bang! Bang!」As the magic from four Mages rained down on the boar's body, a string of damage values rose above its head.

A Level 15 Leader-class Wild Boar wasn't too difficult for them to handle. As long as they were careful, they'd finish the battle in around two to three minutes, and a piece of Bronze-grade equipment would fall into their hands!

They eagerly anticipated the equipment dropping.

“Damn! It definitely has to drop a piece of Arcane Mage equipment! I haven't gotten any in the past two days!” Sugar Cane shouted as he furiously fired off spells.

“Hah! In your dreams! It's obviously going to be a piece of Paladin equipment. My luck has always been pretty good,” Paladin of Elegy giddily replied.

“What the hell, Paladin! You really are ruthless! In the last two days, at least three pieces of Bronze equipment have gone to you!” Sugar Cane angrily exclaimed.

While they were in a cheerful mood and anticipating the drop from the Wild Boar; a party of eight players quietly appeared on a tall hilltop not far from their location. They had been levelling around the area when they received a message from their Thief to rush over immediately.

“It’s a Leader-class monster!” a Mage among the group excitedly shouted.

“But there’s already another party fighting it.”

“What are you afraid of? Let’s just take it!”

Since the decision was made, the Thief activated Stealth and started creeping towards Sugar Cane and the others, hoping to stun one of them before he was noticed.

A chill ran down Paladin of Elegy’s back. He instantly felt something was off.

“Shit! It’s a Thief. Quickly cast Heal!” Paladin of Elegy immediately retreated as a gentle radiance enveloped him, restoring a good portion of his health. He immediately activated Endure, a skill that Paladins and Warriors had in common. This

ability blocked stuns. It was exactly for this reason that Warriors and Paladins didn't fear Thieves!

“Lousy shit-eaters! They're shamelessly trying to steal our monster!” Sugar Cane roared out when he heard Paladin of Elegy calling out. He switched his focus to the ground, paying careful attention to the nearby grass blowing in the wind for signs of the stealthed Thief. Paladin of the Elegy got farther and farther away from the Leader-class Wild Boar as he withdrew.

When their Thief was noticed, the eight players charged down from the hill towards the Wild Boar.

The Warrior among the eight players charged over and intercepted the Wild Boar.

“God dammit! It's Victorious Return!” Paladin of the Elegy cursed as he glared resentfully. The Wild Boar they had found and painstakingly brought down to half-health would be taken just like that. How could he not feel indignant!?

Chapter 171 – Guild! Brothers!

There were nine players all together, all of whom were part of Victorious Return. The Fighter among them engaged the Wild Boar, accompanied by a Priest healing from the rear. Out of the remaining seven, the Thief was still cloaked in stealth. The rest positioned themselves to prevent Paladin of the Elegy and his party from interfering. They consisted of three Mages, one Berserker, and two Paladins.

Both sides stared each other down. The tension was palpable, it seemed like a battle was about to erupt at any moment.

The leader of the party was a Berserker known as Broad Blade. He was approaching thirty years old with a rotund stature, narrow eyes, and a nose bent crookedly in the shape of a hook.

“My friends, I think there’s been a misunderstanding. You see, this Wild Boar was discovered by our Thief, and he’s been tracking it for a long time. We were already on our way over when you fellows engaged it. Let’s not make any rash decisions now, alright? We’re from Victorious Return. If we’ve done anything to offend you, I sincerely apologize...” said Broad Blade with a light chuckle and a squint.

“Bullshit! He’s trying to make it sound like we stole the monster from them!” Sugar Cane blurted out.

“Peh! What a lousy excuse! Pretending to act all nice after forcing us off our mob. Do they think we’re pushovers? That we’ll just let

it go after an apology? What's so great about Victorious Return! Are we supposed to be afraid!?"

The other members of Paladin of the Elegy's party voiced their dissatisfaction.

When Broad Blade overheard them, his eyes filled with murderous intent. His lips curved into a sinister smile, "So what you gonna do about it?"

"Give the Wild Boar back to us!" Sugar Cane furiously shouted.

By this time, Paladin of the Elegy calmed down and analyzed the situation. Their party had fewer people, and the quality of their equipment was severely lacking in comparison to their opponents'. If a fight really did break out, they'd undoubtedly get the worst of it. Not to mention Watchful Snail had repeatedly reminded them to just focus on leveling up. It wasn't worth getting into a scuffle over for what was likely going to be a single piece of Brozne equipment. Once they leveled up, there'd be no shortage of good equipment in the guild treasury.

"Sugar Cane, forget it, let's just go. We'll get back at them some other time..." Paladin of the Elegy ordered.

"We're gonna leave...? Just like that?" Sugar Cane said in disbelief. He really couldn't tolerate such bullying. Besides, just how many of his fellow guildmates had Victorious Return killed so far? It was only normal for him to feel angry.

“Oh? So you’re not brainless after all. Good, make sure to remember our guild emblems the next time you set out. If you see members of our guild, be quick about scurrying out of sight,” Broad Blade sneered. He grew even more unbridled when he saw Paladin of the Elegy’s group turning to leave. He took that as a sign of them being afraid.

Paladin of the Elegy trembled at Broad Blade’s taunting. Even a buddha’s tolerance had its limits. He really wanted to fight, but he couldn’t ignore the fact that they were outnumbered and outgunned. He struggled to find a solution, when an idea popped into his mind. He didn’t have much faith in it, but he sent a message in the guild chat anyway.

「Are there any guildmates levelling near Peaceful Dream Valley?」

「I’m there. Why, what’s up?」someone in the guild chat answered back.

Paladin of the Elegy explained the situation, informing everyone in the guild chat of how a group of Victorious Return players had snatched a Leader-class monster from his party.

「... So I want to teach those goons a lesson, but we don’t have enough people.」

More guild members replied in the chat.

「Paladin, where are you guys?」

「Tell us your coordinates. Let's show those bastards we're no pushovers! 」

「I'm at Peaceful Dream Valley!」

「I'm heading over there right now! Screw those Victorious Return dogs!」

「I'm rushing over from Blaze Town!」

Soon, the chat was flooded with angry messages cursing Victorious Return.

Paladin of the Elegy's plea for help sent the members of Asskickers United into a flying rage. They had let Victorious Return walk all over them for far too long! They were fed up with the constant harassment.

「No-no-no, guys, calm down... Don't all come. I only need a few more people to take them on.」Paladin of the Elegy nearly had a heart attack. He didn't know how to react, especially after getting responses from several hundred people. All of whom were fellow group leaders with at least half-a-dozen subordinates behind them. If so many people arrived, things might not just end with a small skirmish!

Paladin of the Elegy felt genuinely moved by the fiery responses and show of support from his guildmates as well as a sense of

belonging in the guild.

An intense desire rose up in his heart. He wanted to make Asskickers United even more formidable. Only then could they beat back those dog bastards from Victorious Return!

「Everyone, all of you don't need to come. Just a dozen of us will be enough to butcher those sons of bitches into dog meat!」

「Paladin, quickly tell us your coordinates!」

「I'm at Peaceful Dream Valley: 285.283.3809.」

「Alright, I got it. You're in the northern part of the map. We'll be there in three minutes tops!」

「To all those brothers who can't get there within five minutes, don't bother coming!」

Paladin of the Elegy, Sugar Cane, and the others smiled. It seemed they would be getting their revenge much sooner than they expected. With such a passionate band of brothers willing to spring to their aid, they felt like shouting, Up yours, Victorious Return! Who the hell is afraid of you?!

“What's so great about Victorious Return? We're from Asskickers United!”

“Hey, Victorious Turds! You want me to remember your guild emblem? When this is all over, you’d better remember my assprint on your face!” Sugar Cane vulgarly cursed.

Broad Blade’s expression instantly darkened. Heaven Breaker had issued out an order throughout the guild. If they ever met players from Asskickers United, slaughter them!

“Asskickers United, huh. You’re the runts that are too scared to wear your guild emblems out in the open. I was starting to worry we’d never find any of you... I didn’t think any of you would be be stupid enough to show up right in front of us! Guess I was wrong!”

“Well, what are you waiting for? We’re right here! Come bite me!”

The atmosphere grew incredibly tense. The Fighter from Victorious Return was still preoccupied with the Leader-class Wild Boar, along with a Priest. Broad Blade’s group had their focus split between killing the Wild Boar and holding back Paladin of the Elegy and his men. They were left in a stalemate until the monster fell because it would be difficult to face both enemies at the same time.

The Wild Boar’s health fell very slowly. Even after two minutes, a third of its health still remained.

Both sides remained at an impasse. Paladin of the Elegy’s side intended to stall for time. However, if Broad Blade’s side decided to focus on the Wild Boar, they would have no choice but to attack

and force Broad Blade's group onto the defense.

The Wild Boar's health dropped to 25%, 20%, 15%, then to critical levels!

「Finish off the Wild Boar! We'll deal with those punks after!」 Broad Blade ordered in chat. The Mages beside him sent out a volley of magic at the Wild Boar.「Bang! Bang! Bang!」A string of damage values rose above its head.

The Wild Boar was about to die very soon. Paladin of the Elegy's group grew anxious. At this rate, the drop would undoubtedly fall into enemy hands!

They might potentially be losing out on a single piece of Bronze-grade equipment, but it was still very valuable to them. It was a Level 15 piece of equipment after all, and they were mostly wearing Level 10 Bronze-grade equipment right now. Paladin of the Elegy was the only one that currently had a few pieces of Level 15 equipment.

“Priest, pay attention to my health!” Paladin of the Elegy shouted before rushing toward the Wild Boar.

“That punk wants to snatch the drop! Kill him!”

A torrent of magic rained down on Paladin of the Elegy.「Bang! Bang! Bang!」Half his health disappeared in a single instant. When the Priest at the rear saw this, he hastily cast Heal. As the gentle

radiance from the spell enveloped him, Paladin of the Elegy chugged down a Junior Health Potion before pressing on.

“They attacked us first! We get to retaliate in self-defense!” Sugar Cane shouted.

He and the other Mages in the party fired off a barrage of spells at the Victorious Return players from the rear.

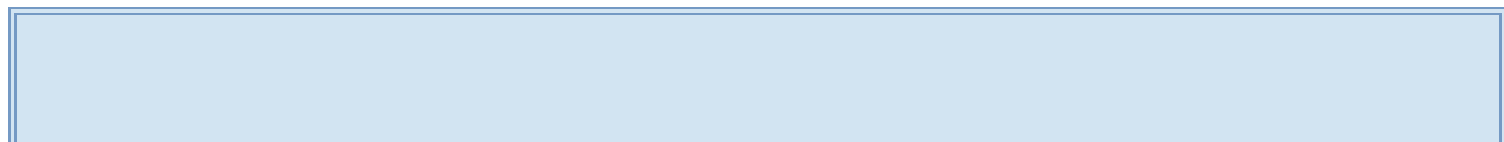
Broad Blade and two Paladins sprinted toward Sugar Cane’s group. The three Mages from their group focused their firepower on Paladin of the Elegy.

“Wipe out this group of trash!” Broad Blade activated Charge as he rushed towards Sugar Cane.

The Wild Boar only had a sliver of health left by the time Paladin of the Elegy closed in. The opposing Fighter was about to finish it off with his next attack when a brilliant idea popped into Paladin of the Elegy’s mind, like a divine revelation. He cast Protect on the Wild Boar.

A hazy, translucent screen of white light enveloped the Wild Boar as the Fighter’s sword hacked down.

「Klang!」



The Fighter was taken aback at the pitiful damage value that appeared above the Wild Boar's head.

The Wild Boar bellowed angrily. It pushed its forepaws deep into the ground and propelled itself forward, ramming into the Fighter's shield. The attack forced the Fighter to take a few staggering steps back, dizzy.

"Good job, piggy!" Paladin of the Elegy rejoiced. He was only a few meters from the Wild Boar. With a Lesser Dispel, he stripped the Wild Boar of its shield before hacking down on it with his sword. The Wild Boar let out a final, pitiful squeal before collapsing on the ground.

"Hot damn! Who knew he had that in him!" Sugar Cane exclaimed. He never thought that Paladin of the Elegy would react so quickly, or come up with a strategy like that. Was he possessed by a god? He actually managed to snatch away the experience for killing the Leader-class Wild Boar!

Paladin of the Elegy was quite elated with his success, having never felt so pleased with himself before. Just as he was about to bend down and pick up the drop, the Fighter from Victorious Return charged up to him.

"Get that kill-stealing bastard!" shouted an Arcane Mage as he shot an Arcane Fireball at Paladin of the Elegy.

The Fighter slashed down with his sword.

Tendon Break!

Perhaps by instinct or a stroke of amazing luck, Paladin of the Elegy activated Endure just as the Fighter's sword came down.

「Klang!」Two swords clashed together.

Demoralizing Shout!

The Fighter let loose a furious roar!

Indomitable Will!

Paladin of the Elegy self-cast the blessing, countering the Demoralizing Shout, before kicking the Fighter aside and picking up the drop from the ground.

“It's mine!” Paladin of the Elegy celebrated. He took advantage of the speed boost from Indomitable Will to run away.

“Stop him!”

「Bang! Bang! Bang!」Three spells successively hit Paladin of the Elegy's back and exploded.

「Bean, heal! Quickly heal me!」Paladin of the Elegy angrily hollered in chat. When he glanced back, wondering why he wasn't getting any heals, the only party members left alive were Sugar Cane and an Elementalist and they didn't have much health left either.

With a single Berserk Slash from his greatsword, Broad Blade beheaded the Elementalist beside Sugar Cane. His name grew more red from that second kill.

Sugar Cane only had around forty health left at this point, so he started to flee.

Paladin of the Elegy sensed a Thief on his tail, getting closer and closer.

“You want to run? It's not going to be that easy!”

Broad Blade's group relentlessly pursued the fleeing Paladin of the Elegy and Sugar Cane.

“You Asskicker United brats! If you have any courage at all, stop running away!” Broad Blade cursed. This was turning into a complete disaster. Not only was his name red now, both the equipment and experience had also been snatched away. He chased after them like an enraged lion, brimming with the desire for blood.

Broad Blade finally managed to catch up to Paladin of the Elegy. Just as he was about to cut him down, he noticed a dense crowd of players emerging from the hills around him. There were almost a hundred players already, and more people continued to arrive. Players of every class, all equipped with different gear, gathered together in one place. The crowd bubbled with excitement and the promise of deadly retribution.

“What are all these people doing here!?” Broad Blade cried out in shock.

“Broad Blade, we have to go! They’re players from Asskickers United!” A few of his party members called out to him.

Broad Blade felt his heart sink. With his name so red, he’d drop a minimum of two levels along with all of his equipment if he was killed.

“Paladin, we’re here to save you!” one of the players in the crowd shouted.

“Kill those Victorious Return dogs! Don’t let them escape!”

Several dozen Fighters and Berserkers from the crowd charged down the hill, like arrows from a bow.

“Kill!”

“Wipe those bastards out!”

The sixty or seventy Mages still standing on the hill brandished their staffs, shining with a deadly radiance. Their spells covered the sky and cast a shadow over the entire area, whistling towards Broad Blade's group.

Chapter 172 – Hellfire Cavern

「Bang! Bang! Bang!」

Several dozen spells battered Broad Blade's group, instantly killing five of them as they were transformed into brilliant rays of light. Two of them had red names, so all of their gear dropped to the ground when they died. Only three survived the barrage of spells with just a sliver of health remaining.

The survivors tried to escape from the area, but several dozen Fighters and Berserkers caught up and surrounded them before they could take a single step.

With the sheer disparity in numbers, Broad Blade's group wasn't able to put up the least bit of resistance.

They were immediately slaughtered.

“Thank you, brothers!” Paladin of the Elegy shouted to the crowd. Without the timely and enthusiastic assistance from his fellow guildmates, his party would've been wiped out by Broad Blade's group.

“Ah, it feels good to finally blow off some steam after being pushed around by those bastards for so long.”

“Sooner or later, we'll wipe them all out!”

“There’s a report from our brothers stationed at the East. They say they’ve spotted roughly three to four hundred Victorious Return players heading towards us!”

All of the Asskicker United members’ faces turned ashen. They hadn’t even been here for five minutes, yet Victorious Return somehow already deployed forces to their location. The response was just a little too fast to be a coincidence.

“We definitely have moles in our guild; there’s no way they could’ve reacted so quickly!”

“So what! Let’s take them on!”

“No, we’ll suffer heavy losses if we try to clash with them. Let’s just go back.” Paladin of the Elegy shook his head. Even after that frantic battle, he still managed to remain level-headed. Guo Huai had repeatedly warned them that now was not the right time to start a full-scale conflict with Victorious Return.

“Pick up all the equipment they dropped! We’re withdrawing!” shouted an influential Warrior among the crowd.

Everyone took out a Return Scroll, and after twenty seconds, the crowd disappeared in a symphony of flashing lights.

Several minutes later, a large group of Victorious Return players arrived at the area. They were led by Underworld Flame.

“The bastards ran away!” Underworld Flame cursed in frustration. “These runts have been reacting too quickly lately. I can’t rule out the possibility that we’ve been infiltrated by them...”

“Boss, what are we gonna do now?”

“What are we gonna do...? What do you think we can do!? We’re going back!”

Just because a battle didn’t break out this time didn’t mean that everything would calm down. With so much friction between them, it was obvious to everyone that both sides hated each other. Asskickers United was constantly suppressed in the conflict, and suffered far more than Victorious Return did. There were only a few skirmishes where they got off lightly. Despite all of this, Asskickers United endured patiently. They were slowly raising their strength, waiting for the day when they would finally have the power to fight back.

...

In a vibrant forest—a beautiful paradise, lush with green, where various wildflowers bloomed abundantly, giant Golden Beetles carrying pitchforks whizzed about. The sunlight reflected brilliantly off their glossy carapaces. They flew around the forest, occasionally landing to rest on the ashen-coloured barks of the trees.

Nie Yan activated Stealth, blended into the forest background, and made a detour around the Golden Beetles. He found a certain

tree and uncovered a locked silver chest by its roots. He crouched down and started opening it with Lockpicking Specialist.

Opening... Estimated Completion: 3%... 37%...

You've unlocked a Silver Chest! Lockpicking Specialist has gained 1 point of proficiency!

The chest popped open with a click. Nie Yan dug around and fished out a Warrior's chestplate and a Paladin's spiked hammer, both of which were Level 20 Silver-grade. Not bad... he thought after examining their properties and tossing them into his bag.

Perhaps alerted by the sound of Nie Yan opening the chest or just plain bad luck, several dozen Golden Beetles in the vicinity charged at him, brandishing their pitchforks.

The Golden Beetles were Level 21 mobs. Nie Yan wouldn't last a second against such a large swarm. Just as he was about to be skewered by the pitchforks, he vanished from their sight by activating Shadow Dance. He fled for his life, while the Golden Beetles looked around for him.

Once they lost sight of their target, the Golden Beetles returned to flying around aimlessly.

Nie Yan ran through the forest for about ten minutes before he reached the base of a mountain. After searching around the rubble for what seemed like half-a-day, he finally found another locked silver chest tucked away behind several boulders. He dropped down on one knee and proceeded to open it.

The chest opened with a click a short moment later.

After rummaging through the contents of the chest, he took out a Lesser Heal skill book for Priests. It was a good find for the guild. Only players that contributed heavily to the guild could obtain skill books and other similar items.

He threw the skill book into his bag.

「Nie Yan, are you there?」Guo Huai sent a message.

「Yeah, what's up? Need anything?」Nie Yan cloaked himself in stealth before proceeding to his next destination.

「I want to apply for a couple of guild quests. We've gathered a little over 10 gold, but it's still not enough.」

「How much do you need?」

「About 3 gold.」

「You can head over to the Starry Night Potion Shop and

withdraw 10 gold.」Nie Yan replied. Applying for guild quests required a huge sum of gold. During the initial phase of a guild's growth, guild quests were like a black hole where money disappeared. Despite their exorbitant cost, they were quintessential to raising the overall quality of the guild.

「Has there been any activity from Victorious Return lately?」Nie Yan asked.

「Minor skirmishes... they don't seem to stop,」Guo Huai answered before letting Nie Yan know what had happened with Paladin of the Elegy's group earlier in the afternoon.「It's a pity four of them died. They were too rash; otherwise, they would've all lived.」

Nie Yan thought about the incident for a minute. These sorts of disputes occurred frequently among the major guilds. If repeated calls for help from a fellow guildmate were ignored in the guild chat, that was a sign that the guild was done for. He was quite pleased that so many guild members joined forces to help out a fellow guildmate, and decided that this was something that should be encouraged. After going through situations like this one, everyone, especially those rowdy players that always looked for a fight, would grow devoted to the guild and each other.

「Four for eight, and three of the enemies even had red names! Not a bad trade!」Nie Yan laughed.

「Reward every member that participated in the battle with 10 merit points!」

「Are you sure? Over a hundred players joined in. That's more than a thousand merit points!」Guo Huai cried out in shock.

「I actually think 10 merit points is still a bit too stingy. Tell them... since the guild was only recently established, we can't give out too much. Thank them for their understanding!」Nie Yan said.

Honestly speaking, 10 merit points was quite generous to ordinary members of the guild. They needed 200 merit points to get decent Silver-grade equipment from the treasury, and Nie Yan's generous gift brought them all much closer to that total.

To earn 10 merit points, they would normally have to contribute many ingredients, materials, and other items to the guild. The alchemy ingredients supplied by the guild members would be given to the Starry Night Potion Shop and turned into concoctions. The profits from selling these concoctions would be spent on buying equipment to stock the guild treasury. The new equipment in the treasury could then be exchanged for even more ingredients, materials, and so on. This created a self-sustaining cycle that allowed the guild to grow.

The guild treasury was rapidly expanding, not through the contributions of guild members, but because Nie Yan was investing extravagant sums of money. It seemed like he could continue investing for a while, but it wasn't wise to depend on one person to keep the guild afloat. The sooner the guild became self-sufficient, the better it was for everyone.

「I think they'll be delirious with joy,」Guo Huai said with a smile.

「If that's all, I'll close the chat. I'm a little busy right now,」Nie Yan said.

He was near Hellfire Cavern.

...

A crowd of over one hundred players gathered together in a hall at the Asskickers United guild headquarters. They were all discussing what happened today and basking in the excitement of the moment.

“What are we going to do about the equipment that dropped from those Victorious Return players?” Sugar Cane asked.

“We'll auction all of it off for merit points. Then we'll split the merit points evenly between everyone that showed up to help us.” Paladin of the Elegy staunchly replied. Without the aid of his guild brothers, his party would have definitely been wiped out. He wasn't about to forget them now that he was safe. He even planned to auction off the drop from the Wild Boar!

Sugar Cane nodded. “We'll have to give a bit more to Bean and the others, though. They went down a level and lost a piece of equipment when they died.”

“Yeah.”

A brief moment later.

“Thank you everyone for your help today. We’ll be starting the auction now. The first item up is the Silver-grade Warrior chestplate that dropped from the Wild Boar. As all of you know, there’s only a small chance for Silver-grade equipment to drop from Leader-class monsters!”

The crowd burst into furious bidding.

“I bid 70 merit points!”

...

“96 merit points!”

...

“129 merit points!”

...

The chestplate wasn’t too spectacular, so the bidding hit a ceiling of 130 merit points. Paladin of the Elegy auctioned off the other items after that. The equipment that dropped from the Victorious Return players with red names was fairly decent. All of the equipment was auctioned off for a total of 1,860 merit points,

which was then evenly divided between all the members that participated in the battle.

“The amount of merit points everyone receives will be fairly small because there are so many of us, so I’m hoping none of you mind.”

“Nah, it’s not a big deal. We just joined in for a bit of excitement. Besides, I didn’t even get to cast a spell. All I did was show up, and then use a Return Scroll to go back. So you don’t need to give me any merit points.”

“Haha!”

The crowd burst out into cheerful laughter.

“Next time you run into Victorious Return players, if they try to make a move on you, you better not keep it from us. Just give us a holler in the guild chat, and we’ll all come running over to teach those bastards a lesson!”

Paladin of the Elegy had a warm feeling in his heart. Joining this guild was the right choice.

“Did you all have your fill of fun?” Guo Huai entered with a stern expression.

The atmosphere suddenly turned silent.

“It’s Watchful Snail...”

“Boss.”

“You guys acted too rashly today. Four of you died pointlessly for a single piece of equipment!”

The crowd stayed taciturn. From their perspective, if someone died, then so be it. A piece of Silver-grade equipment was worth it. Guo Huai looked furious, so none of them dared to voice their disagreement.

Seeing how he intimidated everyone, Guo Huai continued with a faint smile, “But... a fellow guildmate was in trouble and all of you banded together to help him. That’s something worth commending. So Nirvana Flame has decided to reward all of you with ten merit points each. This guild was only recently established, so don’t think this is too little.”

“Woo! Long live Nirvana Flame!”

“The executive guild leader is the best!”

The crowd burst out in cheers. Ten merit points was already more than they expected. More importantly, it signified that their actions had won the approval of Nie Yan and the other higher ups.

There were over one hundred players in the hall. If Nie Yan was rewarding each of them ten merit points, that was a grand total of over a thousand merit points! With that many merit points, a person could take out five pieces of Level 10 Silver-grade equipment from the treasury. He considered this a small reward? They were all left speechless.

Nie Yan's actions generated a lot of goodwill towards the guild. In his eyes, gold was of secondary importance. If it could be used to gain a person's loyalty, then it was well worth it. If this enabled him to create a group of absolutely devoted followers in the guild, even if it was only 10,000 players, it would far surpass the value of 100,000 ordinary guild members. Battle Crazy Alliance was clear proof of that.

The excitement in the guild eventually settled down. Everyone went back to working their hardest to level.

...

You've discovered Hellfire Cavern.

Nie Yan examined the area around the cavern. The rock was charred black without any plant life growing on top of it. A scorching wind blew out from the entrance. Every so often, a burst of flame would shoot out of the cave.

Nie Yan drank an Intermediate Fire Resistance Potion he picked

up from the Starry Night Potion Shop. He glanced at his status bar to confirm that his fire resistance was increased for the next five minutes. It was more than enough time for what needed to be done. He activated Stealth, his body turning transparent, and snuck into the cavern.

Chapter 173 – Chapter Of Wisdom

Waves of hot air rushed out from the depths of the Hellfire Cavern, the heat baking the surrounding rock a dull red. A player needed fire resistance of 7 or more to explore this map without taking constant fire damage. Without the Fire Resistance Potion, Nie Yan would have been roasted by the heat in a matter of minutes.

The Infyrnal, the zone boss that inhabited the Hellfire Cavern, was a monstrous Rock Golem. Just to survive its Infernal Prison ability, a player had to be level 25 with a fire resistance of 30. The sheer level of difficulty didn't just come from the strength of the Infyrnal. Players would have to fight it in the narrow confines of the cavern, limiting the total number of people that could engage it at the same time. In the previous timeline, a guild finally managed to extract the Chapter of Wisdom from this map after players reached Level 30.

Hellfire Cavern was also a popular farming zone in the previous timeline. The Infyrnal would respawn two days after it was killed, so many guilds and players would camp around the area waiting for it. They would call for reinforcements as soon as it appeared, and countless players died in the struggle to secure the drop from the high-class monster.

Nie Yan cautiously entered the cavern, going over what he knew about Hellfire Cavern from the previous timeline in his mind. He was crouched down low and slowly made his way through the narrow and winding tunnels of the cavern. Nie Yan melded into the shadows of the cavern, using the dim red light from the many red crystals jutting out from the walls to find his path. Despite the

tense situation, he couldn't help but think about what a great mining site Hellfire Cavern could be. This place had the potential to produce an enormous number of Fire Crystals.

Once he made his way out of the tunnels, he found himself looking at the blazing silhouette of the monster stomping around in a giant cave within the Cavern. Nie Yan could barely make out the Infyrnal's figure in the hazy red glare. He knew the monster had extremely keen senses while it was awake, and that it could easily detect any player in a 30 meter radius. There was simply no advantage to being rash here. With his current level, there was no possibility of making it out of the cavern alive if the Infyrnal found him. He threw himself behind a boulder, disappearing into the shadows once more. He was going to rest here, observing the Infyrnal and patiently waiting for an opportunity.

Five minutes went by in the blink of an eye and the effects of the Fire Resistance Potion wore off. His health dropped by 8 points every second. He drank a Health Recovery Potion, restoring 5 points of health every second for 120 minutes. The effect of the potion and his base regen negated the damage from the Hellfire Cavern, keeping his health level.

Two hours later, Nie Yan was still behind the boulder. The Infyrnal would fall asleep any minute now. The Health Recovery Potion wore off without him batting an eye. The scorching air burned away at his health. He finally realized that he was almost crispy, quickly drinking an Intermediate Fire Resistance Potion. He only had 20 Health left, so he ate some Barley Bread to recover it. He was literally five seconds away from death.

Nie Yan continued to wait patiently behind the boulder. He should have brought some equipment with fire resistance along. That would have dealt with a lot of the trouble from the Hellfire Cavern. The problem was that Thief equipment with fire resistance wasn't available to purchase. The equipment was of such little value, even to most Thieves, that players would receive more from breaking it down into raw materials than from putting it up on the marketplace. Even with high fire resistance, it was difficult to sell.

Thief equipment with fire resistance had no long term potential either. That's why Nie Yan never paid attention to it. Most of the equipment he bought was for Warriors, which had the potential to spike in value with the release of the new dungeon, Blazing Ravine. The equipment didn't really matter, in any case. He owned the Starry Night Potion Shop, and didn't mind frivolously using potions. The only cost was the price of the ingredients required to concoct these potions.

It was all worth it for the chance to obtain the Chapter of Wisdom! If Nie Yan missed the window of time when the Infyrnal fell asleep, he'd have to spend two more hours in the cavern for another chance. The Chapter of Wisdom was worth the wait. It was the easiest chapter to obtain from the first volume of the Book of Order.

Thirty minutes later, the blazing flames deep within the cavern dimmed out and the air cooled down. The Infyrnal fell asleep! Nie Yan jumped out from behind the boulder, activating Shadow Dance. He sprinted deep into the cavern. Nie Yan could see the Infyrnal resting in a corner, despite the poor visibility. It was fast asleep, the flames around its body pattered out leaving only flares

of blue flame around its joints. It was a giant golem, five meters tall and entirely made of stone. When it was awake, the monster had a corona of bright green flames enveloping its body.

Nie Yan cautiously tiptoed around the sleeping Infyrnal, worried that the slightest noise could possibly wake it up. He couldn't be too slow either. It would wake up in two minutes regardless of any noise.

Nie Yan paid attention to the ground, every step was carefully placed as he continued sneaking past the Infyrnal. The entire cavern was dotted with crevices that exposed the flowing fiery-red lava underneath. They looked harmless, but a player that carelessly stepped onto one would lose a large chunk of their health. The air above these crevices contained superheated air from the exposed lava.

The cavern shook with every breath the snoring Infyrnal took, the walls trembling.

The second he got past the Infyrnal, Nie Yan bolted towards an opening in the cavern walls. He rushed through the hole and into a smaller cave hidden within the cavern. The tiny cave was filled with Fire Crystals exuding wisps of fire elemental energy. Nie Yan marvelled at the sight! A player mining Fire Crystals in this room would harvest 200% more than they would anywhere outside. Sadly, most miners wouldn't have access to this cave because the entire Hellfire Cavern was always occupied by various guilds.

The cave was filled with dense fire elemental energy and scorching flames. Amidst all of that, a single radiant page floated

in the air. The Chapter of Wisdom! Nie Yan reached out and grabbed at it. The blazing aura around the Chapter dissipated the moment he made contact with it. The page quietly floated down and fell into his hands. Nie Yan stuffed it into his bag.

He now had three chapters from the first volume of the Book of Order!

Nie Yan still had more than a minute to escape, before the Infyrnal woke up. He could escape immediately using the Unknown Transfer Scroll, but it made more sense to save it given how much time he had to spare. Without a pause, he used a Haste Scroll and dashed towards the exit; not wasting a single precious second.

The flames around the Infyrnal reignited, the green glow around it gradually intensifying as its flames started burning more and more fiercely. Nie Yan could feel the scorching heat radiating from its body as he ran. He took a running leap, flying three meters right over the Infyrnal! He landed beyond the Infyrnal and shot a web line out from his Silk Spinner Ring at the ceiling. He used it to swing over ten meters away from the still sleeping Infyrnal, instantly putting a vast distance between them.

The Infyrnal woke up as Nie Yan landed. It opened its eyes to the sight of him sprinting away and immediately started chasing after him, startled into a violent rage.

「GROOOAAGH!」

The Infyrnal let out a berserk roar. It closed the distance between them with every stride, and every step made the entire cavern tremble and shake violently. Nie Yan continued to dash towards the outside, despite the Infyrnal's efforts to throw him off balance. The monster was significantly faster than him and it wouldn't be another few seconds before it caught up to him. Nie Yan pulled out a pouch of Intermediate Flash Powder from his bag and chucked it at the Infyrnal behind him without even glancing back.

「Bang!」

The pouch exploded into brilliant rays of light. The green flames in the Infyrnal's eyes flickered as it roared out in pain. A violent wave of flames surged out from the cavern with its roar, ready to engulf everything in fire!

Nie Yan clutched an Unknown Transfer Scroll in his hand. If the situation got out of control, he would crush it without the least bit of hesitation and escape.

The towering wave of flames surged at Nie Yan. He ducked behind a boulder, taking cover from the onslaught. The flames blasted around and past the boulder. The scorching heat depleted Nie Yan's health quickly. He saw his health drop down by 200 points, so he took an Intermediate Health Potion from his bag and drank it; instantly returning to full health. The Intermediate Health Potion restored 500 health. These potions were normally only accessible to players when they were around Level 30.

In the previous timeline, this sort of area-of-effect attack wasn't particularly deadly. As long as you took suitable cover, It would

only deal around 50 damage to Level 30 players, as long as they took cover from the blast. Nie Yan guessed that as long as he avoided a direct hit, he would only lose 200 health at most.

Once the heat from the blast of flames subsided, Nie Yan sprinted towards the cavern's exit.

The Infyrnal was disorientated and confused after channelling its massive area-of-effect skill. It paused for several seconds, shaking off the after-effects of the skill. This was the moment when the monster was most vulnerable, and all the players attacking the Infyrnal would normally unleash their strongest skills; going in for the kill. Nie Yan used the time to run further away from the monster, putting over ten meters of space between them. The Infyrnal roared and resumed chasing him. The chase continued for a brief few seconds, until Nie Yan popped through the exit and out of the cave. The Infyrnal lost interest, there was no longer an intruder in its dwelling. It turned around and returned to its resting place.

Nie Yan was greeted by a refreshing wave of cool air as he came to a halt next to the entrance, gasping for breath. He took the Chapter of Wisdom out of his bag and examined it.

Chapter of Wisdom (Legendary)

Description: The fourth chapter of the first volume of the Book of Order. Whoever shall possess this chapter will receive the inheritance of the God of Light. Your mission is to spread the glory of light!

Properties: Receive 2 Intelligence and 1 skill point every 5 levels. Intelligence +30, Willpower +15, Resilience +15, Jump +15, Reflex +15, Speed +15

Reset: After using this skill, reduce the cooldown of all single-target elemental attack spells to zero and double mana consumption.

Sea of Flame: Summon a sea of flames for a 30 by 30 meter area-of-effect attack. Damage is based on Intelligence.

Restriction: Can only be used by a member of the Righteous Faction.

Note: Item effects are applied immediately upon entering the player's bag.

Nie Yan examined his character information. The Chapter of Wisdom didn't have much of an effect on him; it was designed for a Mage. The Chapter's effects provided a substantial boost to Mages. He sighed dejectedly. Even the two skills were meant for Mages.

His main goal was to collect all six chapters and complete the first volume of the Book of Order. So even though the Chapter of Wisdom didn't do much to improve his effective stats, it still wasn't that big of a deal. He returned the Chapter of Wisdom to his bag, activated Stealth and disappeared into the forest. With

everyone quickly raising their levels, players were already starting to explore this area. It was necessary for Nie Yan to be careful.

His next destination was the Light Monastery. That was the location of the best chapter from the first volume of the Book of Order. The very first chapter, the Chapter of Justice!

The Light Monastery was very far away, so Nie Yan could improve his Lockpicking Specialist skill by opening treasure chests along the way. He examined the proficiency of his Lockpicking Specialist skill.

Lockpicking Specialist: Junior (17/100)

The Lockpicking skill was the hardest to rank up out of all the skills. Not to mention the fact that he couldn't neglect the skill as a Thief; because what kind of Thief couldn't pick a lock? With the speed at which Nie Yan found chests, he was able to find twelve locked chests in two hours.

In order to get Lockpicking from Junior to Specialist, he needed to pick open a hundred chests. Ordinary players would take around a month to find and open that many chests. Finding locked chests in the wilderness wasn't easy. Despite that obstacle, ordinary players still had plenty of time and opportunities to improve their Lockpicking skills before hitting level 30. Many of the chests hidden in dungeons would respawn. A team would be able to find at least three or four locked chests during a run of Medusa's Lair or Sosil Valley.

Ordinary players would need a month, but not Nie Yan. He transformed into a machine, unlocking every treasure chest under Level 30 he could find. Most of them were ordinary or silver chests. He came across gold chests on a few rare occasions. As for dark gold chests, he didn't find a single one. Many of the items he found on his chest-grind were quite decent. What excited him the most were a few of the recipes that he found. Every single recipe signified a surge in profit to him!

Chapter 174 – Exchange

Nie Yan didn't rely on potions too much, but still ended up consuming quite a few of them every day. His use was almost negligible when compared with the groups of players that sought to increase their mobbing speed or take on stronger monsters. Players in Calore consumed a potion every single day, on average. The Starry Night Potion Shop produced 60% of the potions available in the market. How many potions per day was that? It was no surprise that the Starry Night Potion Shop was having trouble accommodating its perpetually increasing clientele, even with all of the recent expansions. Nie Yan planned to open up several branch locations. Now that he found a few more high-end Alchemy Recipes, the Starry Night Potion Shop could further increase its profits and growth.

After spending the entire day running around to find and open chests, Nie Yan's Junior Lockpicking Specialist was at 67/100. His progress was exceptionally quick. The skill would soon reach the Intermediate rank. Once it advanced, he could finally move on to higher level maps.

Nie Yan took a quick glance at the level leaderboards. Tang Yao recently reached Level 26, but he was showing signs of slowing down. The Scaled Frogs didn't give him as much bonus experience anymore. Heaven Breaker, on the other hand, was still leveling as fiercely as ever, but he still needed a couple of days to overtake Tang Yao.

I'll let Tang Yao grind Scaled Frogs for another day or two, Nie Yan thought as he continued his journey towards the Light Monastery.

The Light Monastery was an ancient ruin from the Era of Shared Governance. It was an important stronghold for humanity's resistance against the dragons during the Dark Era. Countless dragons perished from its purifying light for over two millennia. It was eventually abandoned for some unknown reason, and turned into a bandit stronghold.

A Level 30 zone, the Light Monastery was home to some hostile human NPCs that were a pain to deal with. Despite the hassle, Nie Yan had to go there and poke around in order to retrieve the Chapter of Justice. Once he collected all six chapters and merged them together into the first volume of the Book of Order, they would be permanently bound to him. He would no longer have to worry about the chapters dropping and being claimed by others in the event of his death.

Nie Yan was making his way through a rocky region when he noticed a gorgeous, golden shimmer on top of a cliff in the distance, reflecting the sunlight. His mind trembled once he recognized what that particular shimmer represented.

That's a gold treasure chest!

Nie Yan had opened 67 chests until now, but very few of them were gold chests. The ones he did find all contained incredibly valuable items. He was passing through a Level 25 zone right now, which meant that the item contained within that chest would be Level 25 Gold-grade at minimum.

Nie Yan dashed towards the shimmering cliff, running over the rugged and uneven terrain. Ordinary players would have a hard time traversing it, but it posed little difficulty for him. His Jump, Balance, Dexterity, and other movement stats were all very high, to the extent that he could disregard the terrain.

He flipped and jumped over piles of boulders and jutting rocks, and finally reached the cliff face where he activated the Crawler Ring's ability. He stuck to the rock wall like a gecko, quickly climbing to the top. The golden treasure chest was within reach! He pulled himself up over the edge and started walking towards the chest. Right as he took his first few steps, he felt a strange tingling at the back of his head.

Another Thief!

Nie Yan quickly determined the general direction the other Thief was hiding in with his keen senses. Blood quickly filled the whites of his eyes, turning his gaze bloodshot.

Eye of Truth!

He searched the area with the enhanced vision from his skill, but couldn't discover where exactly his opponent was hiding! The Eye of Truth only gave him a chance of penetrating through an enemy's Stealth; there were also times it would fail. Nie Yan let the Eye of Truth fade, his eyes returning to their normal colour. He paid close attention to the ground around him for any subtle movements from the other Thief instead of going for the chest.

He'd be immobilized and defenseless while opening the chest, leaving himself open to sneak attacks. If the Thief took advantage of that opportunity to stun him with a Smothering Strike, he was done for. Someone roaming around a Level 25 map wasn't an ordinary player. Average players wouldn't enter maps above their level; the risk wasn't worth it to them. Only expert players, like his opponent, would venture out into higher level maps like this one.

Nie Yan activated Stealth while simultaneously erasing his tracks.

Hapless Frog was a professional gamer—someone who made a living playing virtual reality massive multiplayer online games. With his recent foray into Conviction, although he wasn't ranked at the very top of the leaderboards, he was still somewhat well-known. Just because a player was skilled didn't mean they would place on the leaderboards. Strength in the form of a guild, financial resources, and so on also played an important role. Kill Love and Sleepy Fox placed near the top because they fulfilled such factors. But as a solo player who didn't have an organization behind him, Hapless Frog could only be ranked at the top two hundreds. However, one should not equate ability to statistics; based solely on skill, he was definitely ranked in the top ten. This rascal was pretty amazing at PvPing.

Hapless Frog always played the Thief class in every game, and Conviction was no exception. He had a particular fondness for treasure chests. Seeking them out on high-level maps was both challenging and exciting for him. He sold the items from chests he found for real money. This provided enough income for his happy

and simple life. That was how he happily passed his days. Many people were willing to spend real money to buy high-level equipment from him. His customers even included leaders from many of the large guilds. Regardless of what he sold, the quality of the items was high enough to entice many people.

Hapless Frog rarely ran into players that could freely run around Level 25 maps alone. Whenever he did run into other players, they were usually in teams. He just discovered a new gold chest, and was about to open it when he spotted a Thief, off in the distance, heading straight for him. He stood around and watched as the Thief started climbing the cliff. When the Thief reappeared at the top and climbed over the edge of the cliff moments later, his eyes widened in surprise. What? How did he do that? Isn't this a cliff? How the hell did he get all the way up here from way down there so fast? It looks like he's here for the treasure chest too. Ugh, it sure is hard earning a meagre living these days. I actually met some competition... Hapless Frog sighed in dejection.

Something else he couldn't help but notice was that his rival raced across the rugged terrain no slower than he would over even ground. What kind of equipment was that Thief wearing to ignore the terrain to such an extent?

He debated if he should retreat or seize the treasure chest right away. He couldn't decide what he wanted to do, nor could he stop himself from bemoaning the loss of the chest. It was a gold treasure chest! Up until now, the vast majority of chests he found were ordinary or silver chests. He did come across a few low-level gold treasure chests before, but the allure of a Level 25 gold treasure chest was hard to resist!

Should I kill him and take his stuff?

Hapless Frog was badly frightened by the subconscious thought flitting through his mind. He scratched his head in vexation. No, no! I'm just trying to make a living and get by. There's no reason to stain my hands with blood. He looked on at the rival Thief who was about to snatch away his gold treasure chest and couldn't help but feel a little reluctant.

While he hesitated over what to do, the rival Thief's eyes blazed with a mysterious light. Hapless Frog felt a piercing gaze sweep past him, threatening to reveal his location. His heart tightened, and he held his breath while activating Cover Tracks, which increased his Cloak by 30 points for two minutes.

The other Thief didn't pinpoint his location yet, but they were definitely aware that he was here and looking for him. A split second later, the Thief faded out of sight. Hapless Frog gazed attentively at the location where the Thief had disappeared, but he couldn't even find a trace hinting at his existence.

He still felt a sense of deadly crisis, which he used to confirm that the rival Thief wasn't far away. The truly terrifying part was that his opponent still found his general direction despite the Cloak bonus from Cover Tracks. What kind of Awareness did this guy have? Hapless Frog couldn't detect his opponent at all!

Just what kind of hole did this guy pop out from? So amazing! Hapless Frog raised an eyebrow. He was seized by a sudden impulse for battle, wanting to cross blades with such a skilled adversary. Coming across another player that made his heart stir was a rare

thing, one that almost never happened since he started Conviction. He compared himself to the other Thief, and concluded that he might come out worse in the exchange. He was absolutely confident in his ability to escape though.

Only the best Thief deserves that treasure chest!

Nie Yan glanced in the other Thief's direction before opening his bag, looking for what he could use. He still had two pouches of Revealing Powder left. This was a rare item that dispelled Stealth in its area-of-effect. It was impossible to find his hidden enemy without it, but did the situation really call for using such a rare item?

As Nie Yan mulled it over, Hapless Frog activated a scroll that enveloped the entire clifftop with a blinding light.

It's a Blossoming Radiance Scroll!

The Blossoming Radiance Scroll dispelled Stealth from any Thief below Level 21. It was a Junior-ranked scroll that was worth about one silver, and it could sometimes be found in the treasure chests on low-level maps.

The light that radiated from the scroll revealed Nie Yan's shadow. A hazy silhouette dashed at him, aiming a dagger at the back of his head.

Smothering Strike!

Nie Yan sensed the incoming attack and instantly dodged to the side. The dagger sliced through the empty space beside him, narrowly missing him by a hair. As it flew past, he spotted a bewitching, green lustre on the blade. It was coated with poison!

Nie Yan circled behind Hapless Frog. He activated [Intimidate](#), and followed it with a lightning-fast Smothering Strike! The whirlwind of attacks would be the end of this enemy's life.

Intimidate: Inflicts the target with fear for 2 seconds. Range: 3 meters.

Hapless Frog saw Nie Yan circle around him and used Swing Slash to deal a surprise attack. His attack was cut short mid-animation. He couldn't budge an inch. Just what kind of skill is that? He had never met a Thief with such a skill before. Just as he was about to be stunned by Nie Yan, facing imminent death, he activated his cloak's Shadow Mantle ability.

He was invincible for two seconds!

A short ding rang out! Nie Yan's Smothering Strike failed.

Hapless Frog made use of the small second Nie Yan left a gap open and struck out with a Concussive Blow.

Nie Yan raised his dagger to block.

「Clang!」

Nie Yan effortlessly blocked the Concussive Blow. His dagger snaked around Hapless Frog's arm, and he countered with a Concussive Blow of his own. His dagger flashed towards Hapless Frog.

By the time Hapless Frog noticed the surging dagger, it was already in front of his eyes. So fast! With no time to think, Hapless Frog dodged the blow on pure instinct alone.

MISS!

His trained reflexes allowed him to get out of the way just in the nick of time.

Hapless Frog crushed a Haste Scroll and fled the scene. A cold bead of sweat dripped down his forehead. Is this guy a friggin' ninja? He was a step ahead of me the whole time! All I could do was defend. That last attack was way too quick. I didn't dodge it in time. Thankfully, it was a miss. If my luck was just a little worse... Hapless Frog didn't dare to imagine the consequences. He believed himself to be quite skilled at his current level. He never imagined that he'd encounter another Thief as skilled as him, let alone one that was even better than him. That brief battle was more than enough to convince Hapless Frog that he wasn't a match for Nie Yan, so he chose to retreat. He wasn't about to die because he got too greedy over a treasure chest. Hapless Frog shook his head with a wry smile.

Nie Yan watched the other Thief retreat into the distance and decided to end the battle here. Both of them wanted the same chest, and he was the one who came out on top. There was no need to pursue the matter any further.

Chapter 175 – Treasure Hunter

Nie Yan glanced at the name of the retreating figure, Hapless Frog. He knitted his brows, thinking it sounded vaguely familiar. If he remembered correctly, Hapless Frog was a professional gamer. He never stepped over the threshold to become a Shadow Dancer in the previous timeline, but that had nothing to do with his skill. It was because he poured all his energy into a different grand undertaking, opening treasure chests! He was a talented, albeit somewhat eccentric Thief. When it came to seeking treasure, however, very few people could match him; he was considered the undisputed champion of treasure-hunting.

There were actually quite a few who held the Shadow Dancer title in the previous timeline, though some of them chose to keep their identities private. On the other hand, very few players earned the Treasure Hunter title. In the entire Viridian Empire, there were maybe two or three—Hapless Frog was one of them!

Nie Yan knew just how difficult it was to earn the Treasure Hunter title. In his past life, he didn't manage to get the title even after finding and opening close to 6,000 chests. He didn't find many chests in normal maps back then, but he used to find three to five chests every day, on average, when he explored dungeons. Even so, he was still far from getting the title.

From the rumours he remembered from his past life, over sixty percent of Hapless Frog's skills were dedicated to helping him escape from dangerous situations; he only had a small number of combat skills at hand. The number of skills available increased as the game progressed. A player might have around 20 to 30 skills on the lower range, or 30 to 40 skills on the higher range. Most

players had more skills available than they could possibly use, so they focused on the few handy skills that suited their playstyle the most.

Hapless Frog was no exception, but most of his go-to skills were all meant for fleeing! His style revolved so much around escaping that he dared to explore Level 150–160 maps in search of treasure chests when he was only Level 80–90. He was certainly an oddball. He missed the opportunity to become a Shadow Dancer due to his lack of offensive skills, but by no means was he some unknown player. Many amazing figures, even the guild leaders of large guilds, would contact him with the hope of procuring some of the items he dug up.

Nie Yan received a message. He glanced at the identity of the sender in the chat window and was surprised to see that it was Hapless Frog.

「Hey, hey, not bad! You're pretty amazing! I lost fair and square, so the gold treasure chest is all yours. Just a quick question. Are you the same Nirvana Flame from Asskickers United?」Hapless Frog could be considered a pretty open-minded individual. Then again, with things like treasure chests, if you missed out on one you could go somewhere else and find another one.

Nie Yan chuckled as he read the question. Hapless Frog probably saw his name before at some point. He didn't reply to Hapless Frog but sent an invitation to the Union of Assassins instead. Hapless Frog operated as a solo player because he sold to everyone. His business would take a big hit if he chose a side, so an invite to Asskickers United would probably be met with refusal.

Nie Yan didn't bother recruiting him as he was aware of this fact.

Hapless Frog felt Nie Yan wasn't going to reply. Just as he was about to move on to the next area to search for treasure chests, a system notification popped up.

Nirvana Flame has invited you to join Union of Assassins (Special Server). Do you accept?

Hapless Frog felt like he'd heard of the name before from his peers in the gaming circle. It was an organization for professional players that was established a few days ago. It became a hot topic of discussion after a large amount of Battle Crazy Alliance joined.

The Union of Assassins was just a chat server. It didn't have the restrictive nature of a guild, so Hapless Frog didn't see any harm in checking out what all the fuss was about.

Hapless Frog hit accept and entered the server. He briefly scanned over the Union of Assassins' introduction and instantly understood what it was about. The organization could become very helpful to his business in the future. Looking at the top of the server's rankings, he saw five anonymous Princes. He wondered what position Nie Yan held.

Nie Yan confirmed that Hapless Frog had joined the Union of Assassins. He would have to complete several tasks and earn points

in order to receive the title of Baron. Nie Yan expected that with his skills, Hapless Frog wouldn't face any problems advancing in rank.

The combined efforts of Sleepy Fox, Kill Love, and Fa Lan helped the Union of Assassins grow to nearly 2,000 members. Their network of contacts extended far more deeply than the players that founded the Union of Assassins in the previous timeline. Sleepy Fox and Kill Love were influential figures who basically knew everyone of importance in the professional gaming circle. They invited over five hundred members from their respective organizations alone. They also attracted a great deal of clients.

Fa Lan, on the other hand, wasn't a professional player. He was, however, a towering everwood in other large virtual reality games. The reputation he built up for himself during his time spent playing those games, allowed him to be in close contact with many professional players. Furthermore, he also knew many bosses from various large companies. It wasn't long before he had invited several hundred people as well, all of whom were potential customers.

Once the Union of Assassins was acknowledged by more and more professional players, it would certainly experience an even more explosive growth in the future.

After adding Hapless Frog to the Union of Assassins, Nie Yan planned to search for more treasure chests while making his way to the Light Monastery.

「Do you mind me asking what you used to get over that cliff?」

Hapless Frog knew his question was rather intrusive, but he couldn't help himself. As a player who devoted himself to searching for treasure chests, Nie Yan's abilities truly possessed an irresistible attractive force.

Nie Yan pondered whether or not he wanted to share this information. He concluded that revealing it to Hapless Frog wouldn't be of any harm to him.

「Crawler Ring, it's a rare item.」

When Hapless Frog read the reply, he gave up any hope of acquiring one. Rare items were difficult to find; one could only come upon them by chance.

「Your guild is enemies with Victorious Return, right? Don't head north. There's around five to six hundred players from Victorious Return hunting the Warlock over there.」Hapless Frog warned.

「Alright, thanks for the tip.」

「No problem.」

Nie Yan bent down and opened the chest. After rummaging inside, he took out a pair of Level 25 Gold-grade boots. It was for a Paladin. Its properties weren't bad, and it looked expensive.

He stood facing north at the top of the cliff. He saw a lush forest below. The Light Monastery wouldn't be much farther after he passed through it. However, Hapless Frog had given him an interesting tidbit of information. Victorious Return players were hunting the Warlock over there. Should he go and take a look on the way?

As he looked toward the forest, he spotted a red mage tower poking out between the trees in the distance. There seemed to be quite a bit of player activity below it, with the occasional spell exploding in the sky. Hapless Frog's words didn't seem to be false.

The Warlock was a Level 25 Lord-class monster that was especially ferocious among low-level bosses, possessing both single-target and area-of-effect spells. It was no wonder Victorious Return mobilized over five hundred players to hunt it. When the Warlock was killed for the first time, one of the items it would drop was a Dark Gold Staff. It was one of the very best staffs that could be found early on in the game. If it fell into the hands of Victorious Return, they were likely to produce an extremely formidable Mage.

Nie Yan wasn't sure he'd make it in time. If he hurried, it would take him at least ten minutes to get there. He didn't dally any longer and leaped high off the edge of the cliff. As he rapidly approached the ground, he activated the Featherfall Jewel's ability. With his falling speed greatly decreased, Nie Yan gently touched down on the branch of a large tree. He launched himself forward, flying more than six meters before making a graceful landing on the ground, where he shot out like an arrow and disappeared into the forest depths.

The area up ahead bustled with noise and activity. The sounds of magic exploding cut through the air. Flames rose high into the sky, and lightning danced across the treetops. It sounded like an intense fight was going on. Nie Yan worried about how much of the Warlock's health they had already shaved away. He was pulled out of his thoughts when he spotted several Victorious Return players up ahead. Nie Yan quietly approached them and listened while they were chatting. Apparently, they were serving lookout duty for the other members of their guild while hunting some nearby monsters.

"I wonder how things are going over there," one of the Victorious Return players said. They weren't part of the guild's main fighting force and were only deployed on menial tasks.

"Hard to say, it's a Level 25 Lord-class monster after all. Let's hope they don't wipe out."

"Skinny Dog said it'll take at least two hours to kill that Warlock. There's too many minions guarding around the tower. It'll take them about an hour just to force their way in. I think they should be entering right about now actually."

"No point in overthinking things, guys. We'll still get our 100 merit points at the end of the day."

The value of merit points was determined by the leader of the guild. In Victorious Return, 100 merit points was worth about 20 copper. A few weeks ago, it would be great if they got around 5 copper worth of merit points for participating in a guild activity. But following the rise in everyone's level, they now got around 20

copper worth of merit points for participating in a guild activity.

As the playerbase progressed further into the game, the depreciation of in-game currency was inevitable. They would earn more and more money from killing monsters. Several weeks ago, killing a dozen monsters might produce a single copper. But now that they were killing higher level monsters, the drop rates were a lot better. Sometimes, several copper dropping from a mob was pretty normal.

Nie Yan entered stealth, vanishing as he snuck around these players.

An Arcane Mage in the group whose Awareness was slightly higher than the others felt a fleeting sense of danger, but it was so faint that he wasn't consciously aware of it. The rest of the group was oblivious and happily chatted away.

Nie Yan passed these players and made his way deeper into the forest. He encountered one or two Victorious Return players on his path every now and then. They patrolled the forest around the Mage Tower to prevent any non-guild players from approaching, as well as hunting any monsters they encountered.

After passing through a break in the trees, Nie Yan spotted a seven-meter tall tower, painted a scarlet-red that greatly resembled blood. Near its base was a large group of players engaged in an intense battle.

“Pay attention to your damage, don't take aggro!”

“Priests, keep up the heals! Shit! Faster!”

Most of the players in the group were around Level 20. Having them face off against a Level 25 Lord-class monster might be a bit difficult. The situation right now seemed a little chaotic. At the end of the day, however, they were the elites of Victorious Return. Their reactions were fast and they suffered very few casualties.

I wonder if Heaven Breaker is here... Nie Yan mused to himself. He picked up on several conversations on his way here, and confirmed Skinny Dog was here. He and Skinny Dog were destined to become eternal foes. When they last met outside the entrance of Blackflame Forest, their battle was cut short by a rain of meteors. Skinny Dog was obliterated into ashes, while he survived thanks to the healing from the Priests of Holy Empire.

Maybe I'll bump into a few more faces I recognize here, Nie Yan thought while slowly approaching the tower.

Chapter 176 – Warlock

A hectic battle was playing out in the open space below the mage tower, with players of every class scattered all over the place. The area near the back was packed with Mages. Some of them even resorted to standing on top of the branches of the trees surrounding the area. With the glow of magic pulsing from their staffs, they sent a steady stream of spells forward.

A group of several dozen Warriors surrounded the withered old Warlock wearing red robes. His beard frayed from anger, and his entire body ignited with a burning, white soul fire.

He still had a fifth of his health bar remaining. Even so, it would still take the players from Victorious Return more than ten minutes to finish him off.

“Unquenchable Fire of Sodom, your devoted believer beckons you to the distant continent of Atlanta! Let your destructive power consume this land in flames! Wretched heretics, enjoy the embrace of death!” the Warlock let out a cruel, maniacal laugh.

The Warlock waved his staff and summoned a torrent of raging flames that poured forth like a waterfall, instantly engulfing over twenty players. The torrent grew into a giant pillar of fire over three meters high. It was as if it came from the depths of hell. Strings of impressive damage values rose up above the heads of the players caught in the spell. Within three seconds, they were all burnt to a crisp.

Disorder spread among the remaining players. The pillar of flame fiercely burned for five seconds before finally dying down, leaving nothing behind but piles of ash.

The area around the Warlock was immediately cleared of all players.

“What powerful magic!” The person in charge, Skinny Dog, drew in a breath of cold air. Without delay, he adjusted the formation and ordered the Warriors on standby to come up.

“Stay alert!”

“Be quick on your feet!”

A dozen Warriors rushed forward to re-engage the Warlock.

The Warlock unleashed wave after wave of spells that bombarded the surrounding area. The Priests frantically cast Heals as a curtain formed by numerous streams of light gently fell from the sky. There were practically several Priests on one Warrior at all times. The health of the Warriors fluctuated violently, causing anyone who saw them to feel extremely tense.

At their current level, Asskickers United couldn't dream of employing a reckless tactic such as this. They simply didn't have that many high-level players to spare. This, too, separated the fledgling guild from an established guild like Victorious Return.

Nie Yan inched over to a tree just outside the battlefield. The closest player to him was a mere two meters away. It was an Arcane Mage, but they didn't notice his presence. If a Thief could get within two meters of a Mage unnoticed during a battle, that Mage was guaranteed death.

“This Warlock's a real pain to deal with. Knife Scar, get your group ready!” Skinny Dog shouted at the players to the east. Even at such low health, the Warlock still attacked with terrifying ferocity. Skinny dog would have to use that tactic.

“Boss, we're ready!” A tall, robust fellow with a scar across his face yelled back.

Nie Yan looked on, bewildered. Just what were they planning to do?

“All Warriors in the center, retreat!” shouted Skinny Dog.

The Warriors tangling with the Warlock hastily disengaged, while Knife Scar's group each unfurled a scroll. Myriad rays of brilliant light blossomed outward.

Crippling Curse!

Darkness Curse!

Freeze Magic!

....

There were over a dozen scrolls, all of which were Intermediate rank. Seeing so many used one right after another was like watching money being flushed down the toilet. Even Nie Yan felt a pang in his heart as he watched this scene unfold.

Victorious Return was rich and imperious. They didn't care about the cost. As long as they could kill this Lord-class monster, expending these scrolls was well worth it.

While Knife Scar and his group were wantonly using scrolls on the Warlock, the Mages in the rear all began casting their most powerful spells.

Meanwhile, a familiar figure entered Nie Yan's vision. It was a Mage that had met death at his hands, Tangerine! She was chanting her spells in a low tone as magical energy rapidly converged at her position. Even after chanting a full set of incantation syllables, she still hadn't completed casting.

For it to take so long to cast, it had to be a very powerful spell.

An onslaught of debuffs pummeled the Warlock. His stats were in shambles, and he was bound by the spells from the Intermediate Scrolls.

All of a sudden, the attackers withdrew. Every single Warrior and

Mage backed away from the Warlock, leaving the area surrounding him clear.

Not a moment later, the magical energy in the sky rapidly combined and surged forth.

Layer upon layer of falling ice chunks struck the Warlock and the ground around him.「Bang! Bang! Bang!」Each chunk left a layer of frost after shattering, causing the temperature to plummet. The Warlock himself was encased in a thick block of ice.

Elemental Hall Ice Magic, Frost Hail!

As soon as Frost Hail ended, wave after wave of deep violet fireballs came crashing down. This blazing storm relentlessly struck the Warlock, devastating him and everything around him.

Obscurus Magic, Firestorm!

Immediately after that was a round of Elemental Hall Fire Magic.

These three Mages, capable of casting Elemental Hall Magic or Obscurus Magic, were one of Victorious Return's hidden cards. Each one had passed through harsh trials in order to learn such magic. They were rewarded with these massive spells that could ravage any battlefield, and were especially deadly during a guild battle. Unfortunately for Nie Yan, Asskickers United didn't even have one such mage.

This battle served as a powerful reminder. Asskickers United still had a lot of work to do before it could catch up to Victorious Return.

Under the barrage of destructive magic, the Warlock's health rapidly fell.

17%, 13%, 9%...

Surrounded by raging flames, the Warlock let out a mournful howl. Just as his health was about to hit zero, his body suddenly began morphing irregularly. He rapidly grew in size. When his transformation ended, he was a five-meter tall Savage Bear. Covered in crimson fur, he resembled a giant primordial beast of the past. The bear's health began to shoot upwards.

"It's transformation magic! Everyone, be careful!" Tangerine nervously shouted. She activated Arcane Reset, allowing her to unleash a deluge of spells at the Savage Bear.

The Savage Bear got up on its hind legs and sent a Warrior flying with a swipe of its paws.

Warriors rushed forward, brandishing their swords, and hacked at the Savage Bear. 「Clang! Clang! Clang!」 But each and every attack registered as a miss, despite landing square on the giant bear's body.

"It's immune to physical attacks! Warriors, retreat!" Skinny Dog

immediately shouted after discovering his own dagger had no effect on the Savage Bear.

“His movements are slow! Everyone, create some distance!”

The Warriors surrounding the Savage Bear promptly disengaged. The Mages also made a quick retreat, while still casting spells and dealing damage as they ran. The Savage Bear incessantly roared, but it was too slow, only gradually moving towards the trees.

「Bang! Bang! Bang!」

The Mages kept falling back while releasing spell after spell. All manner of energy flew at the bear, causing sparks to fly everywhere.

A string of damage values floated up above the Savage Bear's head. Although they were only dealing small amounts of damage, Victorious Return had many Mages. The accumulated damage from several hundred Mages had a major impact on the bear's health bar.

The battle was gradually shifting backwards. It now happened that the crowd of retreating Mages were moving in Nie Yan's direction.

Some of them even passed right by Nie Yan. But their attention was completely focused on the Savage Bear, so they didn't notice

him hiding behind a tree.

The surroundings were filled with Victorious Return players. Nie Yan's situation seemed to be extremely dangerous, but actually, he was quite safe. On top of his stealth, he had also worn a black garb that concealed his appearance. Despite there being so many people, such chaotic circumstances ensured that a vast majority of them wouldn't be able to notice him.

It never even crossed their minds that there was a non-guild member amidst them! With so many Victorious Return players patrolling all around the place, how could someone possibly sneak past them! Besides, even if someone did sneak in, with so many Victorious Return players surrounding them, weren't they simply courting death?

"It's almost dead! Everyone, give it your all!" Skinny Dog excitedly yelled.

Tangerine stopped attacking to drink a Mana Potion before continuing to fire a torrent of spells at the Savage Bear.

"I'm out of mana!"

"I'm out too!"

Even after drinking Mana Potions, so many were still low on mana. They hastily disengaged from the battle and drank Spring Water to replenish their mana.

The Savage Bear's health fell to two percent. It waved its arms furiously, and with a single swat of its paws it snapped a large tree in half, one that would take three full grown men to wrap their arms around. The half went flying, crushing six players to death when it landed.

Although they suffered disastrous casualties, the Victorious Return players didn't stop fighting.

A crowd of Warriors attempted to approach the Savage Bear. Although their attacks had no effect, they could act as a human wall, blocking the bear's attacks. But soon after, the Savage Bear's powerful swipes sent a few of them crashing into trees. They instantly died, and the rest ran away with their tails tucked between their legs.

Nie Yan closely followed from a safe distance. He was only about five meters away from the Savage Bear. While hidden behind a tree, not a single player could notice him!

His excellent camouflage abilities allowed him to completely blend in with the tree bark.

Skinny Dog, Tangerine, and the rest would never imagine that Nie Yan was right by their sides, so close that he was practically breathing down their necks.

Only Tangerine felt that something was off, as if something or someone was close by. But she automatically assumed that the

sense of danger was coming from the Savage Bear.

They were all focused on this intense battle with the Savage Bear. Who'd have the time to think of other things in such a situation!?

A final wave of ferocious spells struck the Savage Bear. It let out an anguished roar before falling heavily to the ground. Its body rapidly shrunk and turned back to the form of the Warlock.

“It’s finally dead. How many did we lose?” Skinny Dog asked. In the final phase of the battle, many comrades died in quick succession. He felt quite regretful.

“Didn’t count, I’d say at least thirty or forty!” said Tangerine as she gazed at the corpses strewn across the battlefield. Prior to the Warlock’s transformation, they had lost about twenty or so players. Adding that to the people who died afterwards, then the death count definitely exceeded thirty.

With the battle over, players slowly came out of their respective hiding spots.

The place was a complete mess. Several players ran over to collect the equipment.

Nie Yan activated Shadow Dance and dashed over to the Warlock’s corpse. He was clearly faster than the Victorious Return players. He set his sights on the Warlock’s corpse. Beside it were some tantalizing pieces of sparkling equipment!

Chapter 177 – Snatching Treasure

Watching those players who ran to pick up the drops, Skinny Dog and the other survivors of the battle all had the same thought. Since they were the first players to ever slay the Warlock, a named Lord-class monster, shouldn't they be rewarded with higher quality drops?

Warlock Hall was a named monster. These types of monsters had their own unique histories and lore. They were more difficult to deal with than the average, unnamed monsters, but they gave better experience and drops.

Victorious Return was willing to expend so much manpower and resources to take down Warlock Hall because they were confident the reward would be well worth it.

To them, sacrificing the lives of a few ordinary members for the sake of helping an elite member grow stronger was absolutely worth the trade-off. Besides, experience could be recuperated, but drops from a Lord-class monster were hard to come by.

Anticipation filled the hearts of every Victorious Return member who took part in the Warlock battle. The higher the quality of the equipment, the happier Heaven Breaker would be. There was a chance they'd be rewarded very generously with merit points.

As the group of players tasked with collecting the drops approached Warlock Hall's corpse, they felt a gust of wind blow past them, and before they could even comprehend what was going

on, they stared in shock as a shadow suddenly emerged beside the corpse, bending down to pick up all of their drops.

Nie Yan activated a game mechanic that had always ticked him off. Whenever a Thief attempted to pick up drops while in stealth, they were instantly revealed as a blurry silhouette. It was meant to balance the game, but at the moment it only did one thing, reveal him to everyone in the surrounding area.

So it was that he exposed himself the moment that he stooped down to collect the drops.

However, the Victorious Return players didn't immediately recognize him. All they could tell was that he was a red name player from the bloody glow outlining his body. His face was hidden by the black garb, as was his guild emblem, and considering how well-secured the entire forest was, they naturally believed him to be a member of their guild.

Nie Yan nonchalantly picked up the drops beside Warlock Hall's corpse. He felt ecstatic but kept his composure. Flashing the OK hand sign with his left hand, he casually made his way out of the ring of players from Victorious Return.

They believed his gesture was a signal that the drop was secured. They parted, allowing him to freely leave.

“Do you know who he is?”

“Why does he look a bit unfamiliar?”

Skinny Dog shot a glance at Nie Yan. With the drops retrieved, he thought they could call it a day. Gazing at the retreating figure, he found it somewhat familiar, as though he had seen it somewhere before. He happened to glance at the chat log at that moment, only to discover that it didn't display any notifications of anything being picked up! A sudden realization dawned on him, as if he was struck by lightning. He urgently cried out, “Fuck! He's not part of our guild! Stop him!”

Every single one of the Victorious Return players were taken aback.

“It's Nirvana Flame! It's that bastard!” Skinny Dog anxiously cursed, finally realizing why the silhouette seemed so familiar.

Hearing that name brought the rest of his guild to their senses. The player who had collected the drops just then wasn't one of them. The Mages quickly chanted their magic, desperately firing a salvo of spells in Nie Yan's direction.

Nie Yan was still casually taking his leave, as all of the Warriors around him still hadn't reacted. Only after hearing Skinny Dog's call did they finally understand what was going on. They all activated Charge and rushed toward the offender.

Nie Yan was surrounded on all sides, with a deadly hail of several hundred spells fast approaching from behind him.

“Drop dead!” A Warrior hacked down on him with a Flame Slash.

With nowhere left to run, they all believed Nie Yan was done for.

Unexpectedly, Nie Yan shot out a line of silk from his left hand which stuck to the to branch of a tree five meters away. With a sudden jerk of the web line, he pulled himself up into the air and swung right over their heads.

The hail of spells bombarded the area where Nie Yan had previously been, creating a massive explosion that sent dirt flying everywhere and forced back all the surrounding Warriors who had failed to apprehend him.

Nie Yan had such an ability?! Underestimating him was a critical error on their part. When the smoke and dust finally cleared, they saw that he had already escaped out of their encirclement and was bolting away.

“Stop him! Don’t let him get away!”

The Warriors all turned around and frantically charged after him.

Another hail of spells came raining down on Nie Yan. He activated Swift Retreat and zig-zagged between the trees, quickly shaking off the Warriors following right behind him.「Bang! Bang! Bang!」Several dozen spells struck the trees around him, leaving black scorch marks on the bark as they exploded.

Nie Yan was hit a few times, but it was nothing serious.

He evaded the lines of sight of the players following behind him and activated Disappear, fading away into the lush forest background.

When Skinny Dog, Tangerine, and a few others caught up, they discovered the area was completely empty without even a single trace of Nie Yan!

“Where did he go?” Skinny Dog sternly asked.

“We couldn’t stop him him. He got away!”

“You idiots! How did so many of you fail to catch one person!?” Skinny Dog cursed. He always had a short temper to begin with. But after sacrificing over thirty players to take down a boss, only to have the drops they worked so painstakingly hard for snatched away, how could he be anything less than furious?

Several of the Warriors beside him felt aggrieved and tried to defend themselves, “He can fly! Many others saw it too! There was no way we could stop him!”

Tangerine quickly tried to mollify the situation. Playing peacemaker, she said, “Skinny Dog, it’s not their fault. Forget it.”

There was nothing to gain from wrongly placing the blame on others. In fact, it would only make things worse.

“Argh! He couldn’t have gotten far! Everyone, spread out and search! I refuse to believe he can keep slipping away!” Skinny Dog angrily ordered. Every nearby member of Victorious Return began searching for traces of Nie Yan. Even the members levelling around the forest were recruited to join in on the search. Their blood boiled with the desire to murder him.

“Skinny Dog, calm down. How do you think he knew we were hunting the Warlock over here?” Tangerine asked. She was angry as well but managed to retain a cool head.

“Who the hell knows... He probably bumped into one of our players while levelling around here. He wouldn’t have come alone otherwise, and we’d have already been completely surrounded by Asskickers United players,” Skinny Dog replied. By now, his anger had faded. All that remained was a feeling of dejection. Even if they did find and kill Nie Yan, what did it matter? It was still impossible for them to retrieve the equipment that they worked so hard for. With a sigh, he said, “Let’s figure out how we’re going to explain ourselves to the boss.”

“All we can do is clearly explain what happened,” Tangerine replied. Knowing Heaven Breaker’s temper, she couldn’t help but feel her scalp go numb. “By the way, just now they said Nirvana Flame had flown. What did they mean by that?” She couldn’t see things clearly since she was all the way in the back with the other Mages and Priests. Otherwise, even if Nie Yan grew wings, they could’ve put a marking sigil on him to ensure he’d never get away.

“I’m not sure either. I’ll ask a player to send a recording,” Skinny Dog answered. A moment later, he received a video from the perspective of one of the players who was close to Nie Yan. After watching it, he stared in shock. “What was that line of silk?”

“I’ve seen it from a friend before. It’s the Silk Spinner Ring!” Tangerine answered. She never considered Nie Yan even had an item like that.

Nie Yan had hidden among some thickets. He knew he wasn’t out of danger yet. There were Victorious Return players searching for him everywhere. He’d have to expend quite a bit of effort if he wanted to run. However, for a Thief as skilled as him, he was basically safe.

He had escaped despite being surrounded by all those players. Now that he was hidden among the trees, he was basically a fish in the water. Even if Victorious Return mobilized all of their forces to search for him, they’d still come up short.

He had come here wanting to teach Victorious Return a lesson on behalf of his guild. After all, several hundred Asskickers United players had died by their hands.

Asskickers United and Victorious Return had already reached the point where coexistence wasn’t an option. For the time being, Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine definitely weren’t willing to enter this conflict. Asskickers United had no choice but to confront Victorious Return alone. Although they were a fledgling guild,

they couldn't show any weakness. Besides, since strongholds had yet to release, they didn't have to worry about contesting for territory. With their guild headquarters still being in the city, what kind of tricks could Victorious Return possibly pull?

If he sent Guo Huai a video of him killing several members of Victorious Return, it would act as a huge morale boost for the players of his guild.

The Victorious Return players searched the forest for traces of Nie Yan in groups of four or five. The distance between each group wasn't very far. With this, if one group was attacked, another group would be able to immediately react and provide assistance. Because of this, the players from Victorious Return felt absolutely safe.

However, from Nie Yan's point of view, they were simply moving prey.

Nie Yan took out the equipment that he had snatched to examine. There were three in total, among which was the Soulfire Staff, the Dark Gold weapon he had been looking for!

Soulfire Staff (Dark Gold)

Requirements; Level 25

Properties: Magic Power 106–119, Intelligence +12, Ignore Level +2, 10% Soulfire Piercing Damage

Attack Speed: 5.5

Weight: 5 lb

Restrictions: Elementalist, Arcane Mage; can only be equipped by members of the Righteous Faction.

Nie Yan marveled over the staff's properties. At this stage of the game, they were practically the best, especially the Ignore Level +2 and 10% Soulfire Piercing Damage. It was an amazing staff for Arcane Mages and Elementalists. Previously, when he and Tang Yao had taken down a Lord-class Scaled Frog, Tang Yao hadn't received a single piece of equipment that he could use. This time around, Tang Yao was extremely blessed. With this staff, Tang Yao could hunt monsters above his level much more easily.

As for the other two pieces of equipment, both were Gold-grade. One was for a Warrior while the other was for a Paladin. Their properties were quite good. Nie Yan stuffed the equipment back into his bag. Victorious Return really did suffer a huge loss this time around. The Soulfire Staff alone was worth at least 6 gold, while the other two pieces of equipment were worth about 1 gold. If that money was divided up between the Victorious Return players who participated in killing the Warlock, they would all receive a littler over a silver each.

Yet these items fell into the hands of a hated enemy, Nie Yan. It could even be said that they suffered double the losses.

A group of five players walked past where Nie Yan was hidden. The Priest among them raised their right hand and sent an orb of light into the sky as a bright radiance illuminated everything beneath it, making the area especially clear.

Nie Yan was hidden behind a tree, so the Priest's Illuminate had absolutely no effect.

"How long do you think we're gonna keep searching like this?" said a Thief in the group as he frowned. He understood that as long as there were trees for cover a Priest's Illuminate was completely useless!

"It would be so much easier if one of us had learned Eye of Truth. Illuminate is practically useless in a dense forested area like this," a Paladin in the group complained.

"Do you really think Skinny Dog actually expects us to find Nirvana Flame? He's obviously waiting for Nirvana Flame to show himself!" rebuked the Priest as he gazed at the two players with contempt.

"As long as he takes cover somewhere and stays hidden, no one will be able to find him. What's the point of searching around like this?" The two players shot the Priest a puzzled look. An ordinary player would never understand an expert's train of thought.

"The reason we're only in groups of four or five is because we're acting as bait. Generally, experts have a lot of self-confidence. Who knows if he'll ambush one of our groups. Even if we die, we have to protect the Priest. At the very least, we have to give them enough time to put a marking sigil on him. After that, he'll be toast!" the captain of the group, a Warrior, said sternly. This was the key to catching the hated Nie Yan, at least as Skinny Dog had explained it.

Chapter 178 – Kill

The Holy Priest class's Glimmer Mark skill was the mortal weakness of any Thief. Once marked, a Thief could be easily spotted by the enemy, even during Stealth. Because of this, Holy Priests were often the prime targets for a Thief's ambush. They were also extremely frail, being a class that wore cloth armor. On top of that, they had the lowest health pool of all the cloth-armored classes. Although they did possess a few attack skills, Holy Priests generally weren't proficient in dueling like Arcane Mages, Elementalists, Holy Mages, or even Shadow Priests, all of whom were particularly thorny to deal with.

The group of players near Nie Yan were entirely oblivious to the imminent danger. Since he had erased all traces of himself, unless one of them had especially high Awareness or sharp reflexes, they were completely incapable of sensing his approach.

The higher a player's Awareness, the faster they'd be able to react to danger. If a player's Awareness was pitifully low, they'd only feel a fleeting sense of danger. It wouldn't be enough for an ordinary person to notice. To counteract high Awareness, Thieves focused on raising their Stealth and Cloak. Nie Yan's were already quite high. As long as he paid careful attention to his movements, save for the few players with exceptionally high Awareness, none would be able to detect his presence. Even if they did sense danger, they'd be incapable of pinpointing his position.

They're trying to lure me out? The corner of Nie Yan's mouth curved into a faint smile. They're playing a dangerous game... Skinny Dog and the other players from Victorious Return hated him with a burning passion. It seemed they were determined to

take his head regardless of the cost.

Nie Yan closely shadowed them, his movements extremely light.

He loved this type of feeling, sneaking in the shadows while observing the opponent's movements. As soon as they exposed the slightest flaw, he'd rush in for the kill.

The group consisted of a Warrior, Paladin, Thief, Arcane Mage, and Priest, a typical arrangement. It was mostly melee focused. While lacking in burst damage and offensive power, it held certain advantages over other group compositions, specifically endurance. Without expending any mana, the frontliners could keep hacking away at the enemy while simultaneously tanking attacks, allowing the group to preserve important cooldowns and deal consistent damage.

They were still chatting while searching for traces of Nie Yan. This forest was the spawn area of Black Bears. They'd occasionally encounter one or two, and they'd have to stop what they were doing to deal with them.

"I'll go draw the monster's aggro. You guys be careful. That Thief might be near!" said the Warrior as he charged toward a nearby Black Bear, opening with a Heroic Strike.

The Warrior would be under too much pressure tanking a Black Bear alone, so the Paladin followed to support him.

“Understood.” The remaining group members all showed somewhat nervous expressions. It was an extremely nerve-wracking situation whenever they encountered a Black Bear because they had to worry about Nie Yan lurking about. They had no idea whether he would take advantage of that opportunity to ambush them. Only when they saw other groups occasionally pass by did they feel a sense of security.

Seeing the Warrior and Paladin leave to deal with the Black Bear, Nie Yan slowly approached the Priest from behind.

The Priest was on high alert. Every time he finished healing the Warrior, he'd reposition himself by a few steps to confirm that he was safe. Unfortunately, his senses weren't sharp enough because this trick didn't deter Nie Yan at all.

The Priest was merely delaying the inevitable. His actions were more or less useless. His movements were too predictable. Nie Yan had long since figured them out. He moved to intercept the Priest on his path. As the Priest approached, he raised his dagger, preparing to stun him with a Smothering Strike!

The Thief and Arcane Mage stayed close by to guard the Priest. They were no more than two meters away. When they sensed the danger, it was already too late. A cold light flashed toward the Priest.

“Not good!” the Thief hoarsely cried out.

Before any of them could react, Nie Yan's Smothering Strike

struck the Priest on the back of the head, stunning him.

He stabbed the Priest in the back with his dagger, then followed with Eviscerate.

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The Priest collapsed to the ground. His defense was pathetically fragile, with only cloth armour to protect him. So the damage Nie Yan dealt was frighteningly high.

Seeing the Priest fall, the Thief loudly cursed and rushed at Nie Yan with a Concussive Blow.

Nie Yan sidestepped the attack as the enemy's dagger streaked past him. With another swift flash of his blade, he struck the Thief in the forehead with Concussive Blow. He followed up with a Vital Strike to the neck, circled around and finished with a Backstab.

Each of Nie Yan's attacks dealt over two hundred damage. The previously full-health Thief collapsed to the ground, dead in only a few short seconds!

The nearby Arcane Mage stared in shock. The battle had barely just begun, yet he'd already lost two party members just like that.

Protect the Priest? He didn't even get to do anything before he died! How the hell was he supposed to cast Glimmer Mark!? The Arcane Mage felt incredibly bitter. He buffed himself with Mage Armour. Just as he was about to cast Arcane Flame Burst, he suddenly felt his body go rigid, leaving him unable to move an inch.

This was the effect of Nie Yan's [Intimidate](#) skill!

Intimidate: Inflicts the target with fear for 2 seconds. Range: 3 meters.

A look of despair appeared in the Arcane Mage's face as Nie Yan closed in on him. After being struck by Assassinate and Lacerate, his health dropped from full to a little over ten points. By then the effects of Intimidate had worn off. He quickly retreated and drank a Health Potion.

Everything had happened way too quickly. There was barely any time to react at all. By the time the Warrior and Paladin turned around to see what was going on, only having heard some commotion, the Priest and Thief were already dead. The only person left alive was the Arcane Mage who was barely hanging on.

“He's over here!”

The nearby Victorious Return players were alerted. They all came rushing over.

Nie Yan picked up the two pieces of equipment that fell from the Priest and Thief. He couldn't be bothered to finish off the Arcane Mage. He turned around and disappeared among the trees.

The Arcane Mage blankly stared at his health bar; he had been inflicted with the bleed status. Despite drinking a Health Potion prior, his health was still gradually falling. A few ticks later, his health hit zero, and he collapsed to the ground.

Three players had fallen in the blink of an eye while Nie Yan vanished without a trace. No one even got a decent glimpse of what he looked like. The survivors felt a chill run down their backs. Skinny Dog had told them to chase down the culprit, but he never informed them that the Thief was so terrifying.

When Nie Yan's cooldowns refreshed, he would proceed with the next ambush.

Nie Yan was like a specter of the forest. He mounted continuous sneak attacks on the groups from Victorious Return, taking two to three of their members each time before vanishing into thin air. Skinny Dog repeatedly warned everyone to protect their Priests. However, whenever Nie Yan materialized, they were always the first to die.

There wasn't a single exception, nor did Nie Yan ever make a mistake.

Victorious Return lost thirteen players, six of which were Priests. To add insult to injury, Priests were the hardest of any class to

level.

Skinny Dog was fuming with anger.

“Skinny Dog, we can’t keep going on like this. We should withdraw!” Tangerine was well-aware of the severity of the situation. Even top-elites like them had already died by Nie Yan’s hands. It would be strange if they weren’t suffering losses by sending ordinary members after him! Up until now, they hadn’t even caught sight of his coattails. If this kept going, they would surely suffer heavier losses.

“We have over five hundred players! He’s completely alone!”

“So what if we have over five hundred players!? Look how big this forest is! Do you honestly think we can catch him!?” Tangerine berated.

Skinny Dog was loath to admit it, but this was truly more difficult than he had originally imagined. If these five hundred or so players were chasing after him instead, he felt he’d have a thirty percent chance, maybe a little higher, of escaping. However, based on the information he received from his subordinates, it seemed that Nie Yan’s fleeing abilities were even greater than his own.

At that moment, Skinny Dog received yet another report that several more members had died by Nie Yan’s hand. He reluctantly gave out an order for everyone to assemble. They were abandoning the manhunt for Nie Yan.

Hidden among the trees, Nie Yan let slip a faint smile when he saw the Victorious Return players withdrawing. The dagger in his hand was soaked in blood, flickering with a dazzling crimson. After doing a little tallying in his head, from start to finish, he estimated that he had killed no less than seventeen players.

Nie Yan understood the principle of not prodding a cornered beast. Now that they had assembled, he would end up paying quite dearly if he tried biting off more than he could chew.

His thoughts happened to shift to the Killer's Demonic Medallion. After hunting Scaled Frogs for so long, why did it still not drop? Could Tang Yao's kill count really not be high enough?

Nie Yan suddenly recalled a certain NPC who happened to be a celebrity of sorts. He was a deserter of the Viridian Empire army. His name was Bordello, a Level 160 Elite as well as a Thief. He carried with him the Sub-Legendary Thief weapon, Godo's Dagger of Fleeing. Before his departure, he had killed over a hundred Calore city guards, and received the title Killing Demon Bordello. Was there a connection? Was it possible that the Killer's Demonic Medallion required a kill count of at least a hundred to drop from the Scaled Frogs?

Kill over a hundred players to become a Killing Demon?

Information regarding the Killer's Demonic Medallion was too sparse. Nie Yan only knew that it dropped from Scaled Frogs. In his past life, players who had really red names would occasionally find one after killing a Sub-Elite or Elite. The redder the name the higher the drop chance. Both Sub-Elites and Elites had a chance of

dropping it, but a Lord-class Scaled Frog had the highest drop rate.

On a typical day, Tang Yao killed three Elites and a whole bunch of Sub-Elites. However, even now, he hadn't found a Killer's Demonic Medallion. At this point, it probably wasn't simply a matter of bad luck.

After some consideration, Nie Yan decided it was better to retrieve the Chapter of Justice first. He no longer paid attention to Victorious Return. He dashed through the forest, heading toward the Light Monastery.

On the side of Victorious Return, after receiving a report from Skinny Dog, Heaven Breaker ruthlessly chewed out Skinny Dog and Tangerine. The equipment they had expended so many resources to retrieve, with so many people present, had somehow been snatched away. Victorious Return had practically lost all face.

Meanwhile, on the side of Asskickers United, a certain video was being widely passed around between guild members. It showed Nie Yan snatching away the equipment of a named Lord-class monster from right under the noses of over five hundred Victorious Return players. He had even killed seventeen of their players afterwards. A glorious matter such as trampling all over Victorious Return was an enormous boost in morale for the players of Asskickers United.

Asskickers United had been oppressed for far too long. They faced constant harassment from the players of Victorious Return which dampened their spirits. Yet the higher-ups of the guild never took action. They even seemed somewhat indifferent. Naturally, this caused some unrest to spread amongst the ordinary

guild members. But Nie Yan's actions this time served as retribution for all the humiliation they had endured. It was a message to the guild members that the higher-ups weren't apathetic, nor were they afraid of Victorious Return. They were simply biding their time, saving up strength as they awaited the right opportunity to strike.

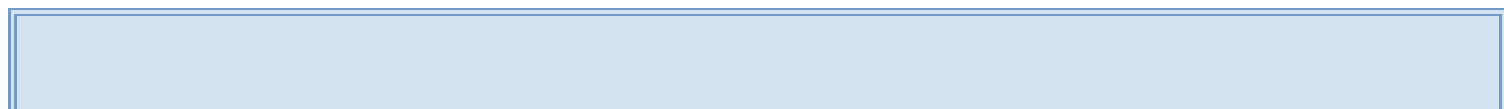
Chapter 179 – Light Monastery

As Nie Yan traversed the dense forest region, he spotted a Kamirun building up ahead beyond the shade of the trees.

Kamirun meant purity and light in the Ancient Common Language. It was a style of architecture widely seen on the holy shrines spread across the various regions of the empire. Its most notable characteristic was the expensive Kamirun white stone, the primary material used in the construction of buildings of this style. It was far more dazzling than ordinary white stone, reflecting bright halos under the sun's rays while giving off a feeling of incorruptible sanctity. Apart from this, Kamirun buildings generally had round rooftops that were deep crimson.

The Light Monastery had fallen into disrepair after centuries of neglect, its white stone walls covered in mud and grime, failing to reflect even the faintest glimmer. It had once been a sacred place of pilgrimage, but now it was in ruins, its years of splendor having long since passed. In front of the monastery was an open square where at the center stood the statue of an angel. It had a pious expression on its face, though it was now barely discernible under the corrosion and wear.

Nie Yan trod lightly as he made his way toward the entrance of the monastery. The gates were wide open, allowing him to peer inside. He could make out humanoid figures cloaked in red skulking around the courtyard. They had crooked backs, carrying a dagger in each hand; they were bandits.



Red Cloaked Heretic: Level 30

Health: 1,200/1,200

Generally, Thief-type creatures had small health pools, but their attacks were quite fierce. They were even capable of stunning players with a Concussive Blow every so often. On another note, as human monsters, money and items could be pilfered from their pockets. So Level 30 Thieves that had learned Steal would find training here to be quite profitable.

Red Cloaked Heretics were classified as evil creatures. So Nie Yan's Intermediate Demon Hunter title could weaken their stats by twenty percent, making them easier to handle. He'd be able to deal around three hundred damage with every attack.

Nie Yan was still only Level 17, so fighting these Red Cloak Heretics would take up a lot of his time. He decided to simply sneak around them.

Nie Yan stepped through the gate, where he discovered a tablet of stone protruding from the ground. It was inscribed with characters from the Ancient Common Language. As it was badly damaged by corrosion, he could only make out a few words.

「Ten Holy Paladins. As the Dark Era is about to pass, we await the descend of light.」

The Legend of the Ten Holy Paladins was an old folktale passed down from generation to generation in the Glennin province. Its origins stretched back to the Dark Era. It told of a group of unyielding heroes who fought against the tyranny of the ruthless dragons while spreading faith in the Light. They founded the Light Monastery, Glennin's most important stronghold of resistance that lasted all the way until the eve of the Dark Era, when the reign of the dragons was overthrown. The monastery was suddenly abandoned, and the Ten Holy Paladins vanished without a trace. Some say that after serving out their purpose, they left for the kingdom of heaven to accept God's blessings. Others claimed they brought their beloveds with them to live out their lives in peace and solitude, free from worldly affairs in the northern prairies of the province.

The Light Monastery was later occupied by Red Cloaked Heretics who drove out the nearby residents, and transformed this place into a bandit den.

Just what kind of untold mysteries were hidden within the Legend of the Ten Holy Paladins? The history of Conviction was always so intriguing that people couldn't help but want to seek out the truth.

After entering the Light Monastery, Nie Yan heard the sound of battle.

"Tuoba, we were doing perfectly fine before. Why the heck do you want to monkey around in a hellhole like this? There's way too many mobs here, and all of them are Level 30. If we meet an Elite, we're toast!"

A crass voice entered Nie Yan's ear. It sounded somewhat familiar.

"If we don't do this now, we probably won't get a chance in the future. The Legend of the Ten Holy Paladins is such a famous story! I'm certain this place is related to it. Maybe we'll receive a Paladin related quest!" The other voice sounded a bit listless.

Nie Yan furrowed his brows. It seemed there were people who had arrived here before him. After entering the monastery's courtyard, there was only one path forward. It would be very difficult to go around them.

Activating stealth, he slowly made his way forward. As he looked up ahead, the scene that entered his eyes left him baffled.

Since people only dared to explore high-level maps in groups, Nie Yan thought he was going to find at least five or six players in front of him. Never did he expect that he was only going to encounter two.

One of them was a Berserker who resembled a metallic titan that could rend the earth apart. Six foot three and brimming with muscles, he wore a full set of armour that sparkled with dark golden lustre and carried a pitch-black greatsword, socketed at the hilt with three blue gems.

Nie Yan's heart leaped at the sight of this person. He really was too perverse. He actually got himself a Dark Battle Armour Set! It

was a set that only dropped from Undead Blacksmith Kalu, a Level 25 Elite, in Darkwind Canyon. Kalu took a day to respawn after being killed while the Dark Battle Armour Set consisted of five parts—Sword, Chestplate, Helmet, Gauntlets, and Greaves—which meant it would take at least five days to grind out the full set, and that was only if you were very lucky.

Nie Yan shifted his focus to the other, a Paladin in azure armour. He wore the Aqua Holy Light Set, another Level 25 set. The difficulty of obtaining this set wasn't far off from the Dark Battle Armour Set. It would require the player to expend quite a bit of effort, at least seven to eight days of work.

The backs of these players looked a little familiar. He inspected the both of them with Transcendent Insight.

Tuoba Time: Level 25
Class: Paladin

Very Forthright: Level 25
Class: Berserker

Nie Yan was shocked. Both these players were Level 25, yet their names didn't show on the leaderboards. They were just like him, players who wished to stay anonymous. He now recalled why he found them a bit familiar. He had met them before, outside the

entrance of the Starry Night Potion Shop right after establishing it! Back then, they didn't make much of an impression. Who could've imagined they'd appear so high-spec the next time he encountered them! Taking into account their levels and gear quality, they surely had astonishing backgrounds!

No wonder they dared to explore the Light Monastery with only two people.

Although Nie Yan had never heard of these two players before in his past life, there were actually many experts he wasn't aware existed. These kinds of players generally weren't professional gamers. They simply played for pleasure, not caring for fame or profit. However, most of these players were just as skilled as professional players. They usually came from wealthy backgrounds, so gains and losses in the game were of no importance.

Nie Yan could also obtain a full set of equipment like theirs if he spent six or seven days farming. But for him, putting in all that effort for some gear that he'd switch out after five or ten levels anyway wasn't a cost-effective use of his time. On the other hand, collecting the six chapters from the first volume of the Book of Order would benefit him far into the future. Even seeking out the last fragment needed to fully repair Sulgata's Shadow was a more efficient course of action.

Forthright and Tuoba had just finished their battle. Beside their feet was the corpse of a Red Cloaked Heretic.

After picking up the drops, the two didn't pause for rest.

Forthright charged forward and taunted over a dozen Red Cloaked Heretics in the vicinity, forcing them to pounce at him.

Whirlwind Slash!

Forthright's greatsword swept through all the Red Cloaked Heretics, causing damage values of over two hundred to float up above their heads. Inversely, they only dealt thirty to forty damage to him each.

Although the Dark Battle Armour Set was an offensively focused set, its defensive capabilities couldn't be overlooked.

Warriors also gained a damage bonus when attacking leather-armoured opponents, so Forthright's damage was truly impressive.

Tuoba Time cast Lesser Heal on Forthright, then slashed a nearby Red Cloaked Heretic with a Divine Strike.

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The holy light of Paladins was quite potent against evil creatures. After landing the Divine Strike, Tuoba Time activated Divine Decree. The holy aura around him radiated outward. Resembling tiny needles, they stabbed into the bodies of the Red Cloaked Heretics who lost twenty health every second under the brilliant radiance.

Forthright activated Whirlwind Slash once more. As his greatsword swept in a full circle, he caused a blanket of damage values to rise into the air. It wasn't long before the group of Red Cloaked Heretics collapsed to the ground as the courtyard became littered with corpses.

Tuoba Time picked up all the items that dropped on the floor and sorted them out. Afterwards, he and Forthright found a corner where they could sit down. They ate Barley Bread to recover their health, all the while chatting.

“That Legend of the Ten Holy Paladins or whatever, it's just background lore to pad the game! For all we know, there might be nothing here! Is it really worth risking our lives!?” Although it was only the two of them, Forthright's voice was still as loud as a bullhorn.

“Who knows? We're just here to take a look. If we don't find anything, then so be it. Besides, even if we meet an Elite, I'm pretty sure we can handle it. If we encounter more than one, we can just run for it,” Tuoba Time answered lackadaisically.

Forthright knew no matter what he did, he wouldn't be able to convince Tuoba to leave. This rascal seemed like a lazy fool who'd give up after encountering the slightest bit of resistance, but in actuality, he was impossibly stubborn; once his mind was set on something, even ten oxen couldn't hold him back. Originally, there were six members in their party. They were supposed to go off somewhere to level together, but Tuoba kept insisting on going to the Light Monastery even though the others didn't want to. In the

end, the only people left were him and Forthright.

“How did I ever end up befriending a guy like you? Hah... what choice do I have. We were in this together the moment I decided to follow you,” said Forthright with a wry smile.

Tuoba Time faintly smiled. Forthright was a brash individual, but his personality wasn't bad.

As for Tuoba, although he was usually lost in his own world, he was also very loyal. This was why these two seemingly entirely different people got along so well.

The two stood up after their health bars were restored to full, ready to take on the next group of monsters.

Forthright took up a battle stance.

Tuoba Time gave himself and Forthright multiple blessings. Their Strength, Dexterity, Awareness, and other stats received a significant boost. With these blessings active, Tuoba felt a slight tremor in his mind.

“Watch out, there's a Thief!” Tuoba Time cried out, activating Eyes of the Divine. His pupils shone with a golden light as he scanned the surroundings. He discovered Nie Yan lurking in the shadows around ten metres away from them. Not too far away, but it didn't seem like he had any intention of attacking them.

Forthright stared blankly. As a Warrior, his Awareness was much lower than a Paladin's. It didn't help that he had a restless nature either. He was fine blindly charging into battle and beating up foes, but when it came to a task that required a sharp mind, like detecting an enemy in stealth, his performance was rather poor. Then again, he was a Warrior with great equipment. Even if he didn't pay attention to his surroundings when levelling outside, no Thief would be stupid enough to attack him. Although he could be immobilized for a few seconds with a Concussive Blow, he was too tanky to be bursted down from full health. As soon as he recovered and struck out with a Tendon Break, any ordinary Thief would drop like a wet rag.

Chapter 180 – Recruitment

If not for the substantial boost in Awareness from the blessings, Tuoba wouldn't have noticed Nie Yan even if he had snuck up right behind him. Even then, he had merely felt a slight chill behind his neck, something the ordinary player wouldn't notice.

“Hey, buddy! I know you're there! Why don't you come out?” Tuoba stared at the blurry figure beside the wall and couldn't help but be taken aback. Just how high was this fellow's Cloaking? His Eyes of the Divine could see through the stealth of most Thieves. Yet all he saw of Nie Yan was a hazy outline, almost as if he were looking at a mirage that would wink out of existence with a simple blink of the eye.

Nie Yan knew he had been exposed when he saw the light shining from Tuoba's eyes.

He deactivated his stealth, revealing himself to them.

“It's you?” Tuoba stared in shock, recalling the time he had met Nie Yan outside the Starry Night Potion Shop. He never expected they'd meet again here, of all places.

He estimated around two weeks had passed since they'd last met. Back then, the Starry Night Shop had just barely opened its doors. Now, it was a colossus in the concoction market of Calore. Truly no one could've predicted this was how things would turn out.

If they had met again in Calore, Tuoba wouldn't have thought

much of it. However, since Nie Yan had appeared in the Light Monastery, he had no choice but to take note of him. He was brazen enough to storm such a high level map all by himself, to say nothing of the fact he was only Level 17!

Nie Yan lightly shrugged his shoulders, and said, “I’m just passing through.”

He wished for nothing more than to avoid coming into conflict with Tuoba and Forthright. As Paladins and Berserkers, they greatly inhibited his ability to deal effective damage, especially with the thick plate-armour protecting them. On top of that, the quality of their gear was quite high, and they were a good deal higher level than him. Although he felt confident in guaranteeing his own safety, it was impossible for him to take down the both of them.

“Hey! Didn’t think we’d run into you here!” Forthright heartily laughed as he walked up to greet Nie Yan without thinking. “Looks like you’ve got a red name! ...Crap! It’s that red!?” he cried out in shock. “Just how many people did you kill?”

Nie Yan brought up his guard. His name was currently branded a deep crimson, resembling the colour of blood. He couldn’t discount the possibility that Forthright might act against him, especially if he was one of those greedy types who coveted the equipment of others.

Tuoba quickly stopped Forthright from getting any closer to Nie Yan. With a faint smile, he apologetically said, “My friend here didn’t mean any harm. He just doesn’t think when he acts. Please

don't mind him."

Nie Yan's name was red, so a misunderstanding was bound to occur if Forthright rushed up to him.

Forthright realized the blunder he'd just made. He scratched his head and let out an embarrassed chuckle.

"Would you be interested in joining our party?" Tuoba offered. Nie Yan greatly intrigued him. He wanted to find out what exactly Nie Yan was doing here, and the simplest way to dispel any doubts between both sides was to form a party, since players within the same party, team, or guild were disallowed from attacking each other. This was a rule set by the game developers to ensure some trust during any activities that required cooperation. Otherwise, what was the point behind a partying system if anyone with vile intentions could force a run to fail by attacking fellow teammates during a dungeon run?

Nie Yan considered for a moment, then asked, "Are you guys planning to hunt mobs on the outskirts or explore inside?"

Entering the Light Monastery by himself posed a certain degree of difficulty. He could only rely on the Silk Spinner Ring and Crawler Ring to help him get past the hordes of Red Cloaked Heretics. However, with Tuoba and Forthright's help, he could probably directly rush into the inner hall. As for the central hall, those two wouldn't be able to enter; only he could access it.

"Of course we're going inside," Tuoba replied, though he

couldn't help but wonder. Why exactly did Nie Yan want to enter the Light Monastery?

“Good, then we can all enter the inner hall together,” Nie Yan said. He was trying to figure out the backgrounds of Tuoba and Forthright. Based on their gear and level, they definitely weren't ordinary solo-players. Besides, having a few more powerful friends would only be beneficial to the growth of his guild in the future.

“Great, then it's settled!” said Tuoba before sending him a party invite.

Nie Yan hit accept.

You have joined Tuoba Time's party.

After joining, the wariness between both sides almost all but dissipated.

“Let's hunt some monsters. We can chat while we fight,” Tuoba said. With a Thief in the party, they could leave aggroing the mobs to him.

“What's the most you guys deal with at once?” Nie Yan asked. By getting a clear read of Forthright and Tuoba's strength, he would know how to proceed.

“Around dozen or so, I’d say,” Tuoba answered.

Nie Yan was slightly startled. Based on their current level, being able to take on a dozen Red Cloaked Heretics at once was an extraordinary feat. Such ability would allow them to effortlessly rise into the upper ranks of the leaderboards.

“Alright.” Nie Yan nodded before he walked up to a nearby pillar. He spotted around thirty or so Red Cloaked Heretics up ahead. Normally, Tuoba and Forthright would have to split a crowd of this size into three smaller, more manageable groups. However, now that he was in the party, he felt they could cope with just a few more.

Nie Yan took out his Crossbow of Blood, propped it up against his shoulders, and fired.「Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!」Three bolts shot out toward the crowd. After some of them were struck, all of the Red Cloaked Heretics discovered his presence, and they came rushing after him.

“Oh my God! You aggroed so many of them! Pal, do you actually know how to pull mobs!?” Forthright paled in fright when he saw over thirty Red Cloaked Heretics swarming toward them. He and Tuoba were already at their limits dealing with a dozen of them. Even with the addition Nie Yan, maybe they’d be able to cope with six or seven more. Who could’ve imagined that he’d aggro all of them in one go?!

Any person with half a brain would consider whether Nie Yan was trying to kill them with a borrowed knife.

“Go up and attack them, then you’ll understand,” Nie Yan replied as he regrouped with them.

“Listen to him,” Tuoba said after a brief moment of hesitation. He felt Nie Yan probably had his own reasons. Besides, if they really couldn’t cope, he and Forthright both possessed fleeing skills. So escaping wouldn’t be a problem.

Although Forthright felt a bit apprehensive, he trusted in his friend’s words. In any case, even if they ended up being surrounded, they could simply bulldoze their way out. He rushed forward to meet the crowd and activated Taunt, forcing the Red Cloaked Heretics to aggro onto him. As soon as he saw so many of them pouncing on him, he felt a cold bead of sweat drip down from his forehead.

「Clink! Clink! Clink!」Their daggers struck him quick succession but dealt less than ten damage each, not even half of what it had been earlier. Quickly recovering from the shock, he brandished his greatsword.

Whirlwind Slash!

-310, -305, -312...

A blanket of damage values floated up into the air.

What the hell? Why’s there such a huge difference? Forthright

was flabbergasted. Previously, the damage per hit from the Red Cloaked Heretics ranged from the high tens to the low twenties. Yet now, they could barely deal ten damage. His attacks as well—earlier, he had dealt around two hundred damage, but now, he was hitting in the three hundreds.

As he examined the maximum health of the Red Cloaked Heretics, he noticed they had been reduced to a little under a thousand. Three Whirlwind Slashes would be enough to finish them off.

Tuoba was also shocked beyond belief by this development. He glanced at the nearby Nie Yan who was also in the middle of combat. He was almost certain the sudden change in the Red Cloaked Heretics had to do with him. Just what kind of perverse ability could cripple a group of monsters so badly? The question lingered on in his mind.

Tuoba activated Divine Strike, chopping down on a Red Cloaked Heretic that had rushed up to him.

-960!

An instant kill! It was a critical hit! The Red Cloaked Heretic collapsed to the ground.

Prior to this, such damage was inconceivable!

Nie Yan took down a Red Cloaked Heretic after two or three hits.

Turning to look at how Forthright was holding up, all he saw was a large pile of corpses lying on the ground around his feet. He couldn't help but feel a little envious of Warriors with their AoE attacks like Whirlwind Slash.

“Haha, this is great! These Red Cloaked Heretics are so much weaker than before! Even if you threw thirty or forty more at me, I'd still have no problem dealing with them!” Forthright happily exclaimed as he relentlessly swung his greatsword at the surrounding mobs.

As the battle drew to a close, Forthright had killed the most with almost twenty Red Cloaked Heretics slain. Tuoba had also dispatched half-a-dozen or so himself.

Corpses littered the ground around them.

The harvests from this battle were quite generous. Nie Yan collected all the drops from the ground and set them aside in a separate bag. When the time came for the party to dissolve, they'd be divided up evenly between the three of them.

“What kind of skill was that? It's so powerful, and the duration is so long as well. It should be an aura-type skill, right?” Tuoba asked. The effects of Nie Yan's skill were simply too stunning. Even he couldn't help but feel a hint of envy. With this sort of skill, levelling would be significantly faster. Out of any skill in the game, skill books for aura-type skills were the hardest to obtain.

“You're right. It does have an aura effect.” Nie Yan nodded. “It

reduces the health and defense of all evil creatures.”

As for the exact details of the skill, that was the other side’s business. Tuoba didn’t feel good about prying any further either.

The three players cleared out the monsters in the area as they slowly penetrated deeper into the monastery. An hour or so later, Nie Yan levelled up to Level 18.

As the two sides became more familiar with one another, the topics of their conversations gradually became more intimate.

“What guild are you two from?” Nie Yan finally asked. If they weren’t part of a guild, he had a hard time imagining how solo-players could get their hands on such good equipment, unless they were people who had reincarnated into the past just like him?

“What guild are we from?” Tuoba chuckled, and said, “You must be very curious about why Forthright and I have such good equipment, right?”

“Right.” Nie Yan nodded.

“I was wondering when you were finally going to ask that! You couldn’t stand it anymore, eh?” Forthright chimed in, revealing a big wide grin. “We’re not part of a guild. Tuoba’s family owns a gaming org, so we have a pretty easy time finding people to party up with.”

“Which gaming org?” Nie Yan asked in surprise. Just which gaming organization of was capable of grinding out the full Dark Battle Armour Set so early on in the game’s life?

“Withered Leaf.”

Nie Yan was taken by surprise once more after hearing the name of the organization. Withered Leaf was a top five gaming organization, on the same level as Battle Crazy. It was founded by a family financial group, more precisely the Tuoba Financial Group. According to hearsay, they had their hands in over twenty different markets, including hotels, boutiques, and virtual reality businesses. It was one of the few domestic entities that had the financial capital to rival Cao Xu’s Century Financial Group.

Tuoba carefully eyed Nie Yan. When he noticed that Nie Yan didn’t show much of a reaction, he revealed a faint smile. After finding out about his family’s wealth, if he saw any traces of greed in Nie Yan’s eyes—like those snobbish associates who fawned over him at his family’s financial group—he would unavoidably have a lower opinion of him.

“Well, what I got out of this is that you guys aren’t part of any guild! So... would you be interested in joining mine?” Nie Yan asked Tuoba and Forthright with a light smile.

“Asskickers United?” Tuoba examined the guild emblem on Nie Yan’s chest. Its logo was a [tribal minotaur head](#). It was simple yet elegant.

It’s a pun on the guild’s name in Chinese, 牛人部落, which

literally translates to “Cow People Tribe.” 牛人 in Chinese, however, is also slang for Badass, Asskicker, Amazing Person, and so on.

Chapter 181 – Withered Leaf

The guild emblem for Asskickers United had been personally selected by Nie Yan. He was fond of flavourful things that were rich with cultural references.

“I’ve already heard of the bad blood between your guild and Victorious Return. From what I know, it’s only a matter of time before you guys get swallowed up,” Tuoba said. The professional players from Withered Leaf had all been puzzled over something. Granted the recent expansion of Asskickers United was indeed worthy of praise, but it was still a fledgling guild, yet to establish a firm foundation. To dare to confront an esteemed behemoth like a Victorious Return? This was clearly a case of the [newborn calf not fearing the tiger](#).

There’s actually a pun here that’s hard to translate into English. The characters for Asskickers United, 牛人部落, are literally translated as Cow People Tribe. So fledgling Cow People Tribe... newborn calf not fearing the tiger.

Nie Yan felt a slight hint of anger at Tuoba’s words, but he couldn’t deny that his concerns were quite reasonable. Any player would naturally have to consider these things before joining a guild. Siding with his guild meant becoming enemies with Victorious Return, so why would Tuoba willingly enter into such a disadvantageous situation?

But Nie Yan disagreed with Tuoba’s assessment. Just as he was about to refute, Tuoba continued, “However, I’m still willing to join your guild. I just want to let you know, though. My matters don’t reflect the stance of Withered Leaf. Although my family

owns the gaming org, I'm still removed from them." Even though he could get Withered Leaf players to party up with him, he wasn't a member of the organization. So he had no jurisdiction over anyone there. Withered Leaf's sole purpose was to generate a profit, whether through in-game businesses, selling merch, or other venues for revenue, while he simply played for leisure.

"You guys are the only ones crazy enough to duke it out with them to the death, but what I admire most is precisely that sort of foolhardy bravery, Besides, I'm also fond of a good challenge!" said Tuoba with a faint smile.

"Well since Tuoba's joining, you can count me in as well," Forthright said. He knew Tuoba's personality pretty well, but even he was baffled as to why his friend had agreed to join.

Truthfully, Tuoba didn't much care for the fame of Asskickers United. He'd accepted the invite simply because he found Nie Yan to be a person worth befriending, with a very agreeable temperament. What he treasured most was a person that he could sincerely interact with.

Nie Yan was a little astonished. He didn't expect the sudden shift in attitude from Tuoba. After a second thought though, he began to understand Tuoba's intentions.

"It seems I was small-minded," Nie Yan said with an apologetic smile. "But I still have to disagree with your judgement. Sooner or later, the guild that's going to be wiped from Calore will be Victorious Return, not mine."

Tuoba's expression flickered with a hint of surprise. Just where was this self-confidence coming from?

"Alright, let's drop the subject. I'm getting a headache listening to you guys. As far as I'm concerned, joining a guild isn't a bad thing. Hey, do you think I'll be the top Berserker in the guild?" Forthright interjected. To him, this matter was far more interesting.

"Yeah, I'd say so. As for being the top Warrior though, I think you still fall a little short," Nie Yan replied. If he had to compare Forthright and Bladelight, he felt the latter was a bit stronger. Bladelight had recently obtained the best armour set from the Sorens Dungeon on Specialist, and although he was slightly behind Forthright in level, he could overcome that difference with skill.

"Damn, there's actually a Warrior who's stronger than me? I want to meet him when we get back!" Forthright boiled with competitive spirit.

Tuoba pondered in silence. Maybe Asskickers United really did have quite a few strong players; otherwise, Nie Yan wouldn't have such confidence.

Tuoba had met the top-ranking players in Victorious Return before. Most of them weren't that impressive, but he couldn't help but feel dispirited when he thought of Heaven Breaker. That guy's precise control was simply too formidable. Even he didn't feel confident going against him.

There was a commonly held belief among players that an individual's strength didn't matter in front of the absolute might of a guild. But in the stronghold sieges not too long from now—which would determine the future prosperity of a guild—any powerful individual could greatly influence the tide of battle.

Victorious Return might be powerful, but Asskickers United was rapidly catching up. Nie Yan felt confident that they would overtake them, sooner or later. He had already tasked Guo Huai with sending out invitations to various players who would become Magisters, Guardians, Shadow Dancers, and so on in the future. Although many of them might disdain joining his guild, there were others who just started playing, so their potential still remained untapped. Since they were still nobodies, once they received a gracious invite from Asskickers United, they would almost certainly wholeheartedly devote themselves to the guild.

[Taotie](#) and Undying Scoundrel, for example—both players with the capacity to become a Guardian and a Magister respectively—though confused as to why Asskickers United would seek them out, they quickly fell to temptation under the lure of superior benefits.

Nie Yan had handed Guo Huai a recruitment list of all of the famous players that he remembered in his past life. Although only a small portion of the people on that list would agree to join, it was still quite impressive. There were already five individuals in the guild that had high chances of becoming Shadow Dancers, Guardians, Magisters, and so on. As for players just a rank lower, there were over several dozen. There were also many players who Guo Huai was still in the midst of negotiations with, hoping to entice them with many favourable conditions. He even spared no

effort in trying to headhunt the players who had already joined other guilds.

With the support of Nie Yan's enormous capital, Asskickers United would eventually become a mecca for godly players.

After that, the guild would not just be full of asskickers in name but also reality.

There were actually many strong players in the previous timeline that didn't reveal themselves to the public. Forthright and Tuoba were such players, not only in terms of level and gear but also skill. With their addition to the guild, Asskickers United would undoubtedly gain two more top-ranking experts.

Nie Yan could clearly sense that as Asskickers United slowly developed under his control, the guild would inevitably grow into a mighty oak, towering over all below the heavens.

Tuoba Time has joined your guild.

Very Forthright has joined your guild.

"I have a full set of Thief equipment you can have, but it belongs to Withered Leaf. If you can take out a few items to exchange for it, I can call up some people up," Tuoba offered. He actually felt a bit awkward. Even though the organization belonged to his family, he had no authority over it. So he had no right to just give away their equipment unless he returned with something of equal value.

"What level?" Nie Yan asked. He didn't expect them to have any

extra sets of high-level equipment lying around.

After thinking it over, it didn't seem so strange. Withered Leaf was just like Battle Crazy, a well-established gaming organization. Out of the top one hundred professional players domestically, over ten were from Withered Leaf. There were also around forty or fifty in the top five hundred. Such a powerful gaming organization was highly efficient in gathering resources.

Nie Yan was suddenly reminded of the past. The War God Tribe gaming organization backed by his father had once surpassed Withered Leaf and Battle Crazy for a time. It seemed his thinking was still too small-scale.

“Level 20, one of the members from their elite team hit Level 25 recently, so they're switching their old set out. Right now, who it goes to hasn't been decided. So if I want it, they'll definitely give it to me, but I'll also have to hand over some things in exchange; they won't be able to make up for the loss otherwise,” Tuoba explained. Since his family owned Withered Leaf, the higher-ups there didn't dare to ignore him if he wanted equipment from them. “Aside from my gear, I'm actually quite poor.” Tuoba wryly smiled.

“Ah, I see...” Nie Yan nodded. After considering the offer, he said, “I can take out a full set of Level 30 Gold-grade equipment to trade, but I want to check out the properties of the Thief equipment first.” After grinding Scaled Frogs for so long, Tang Yao had collected over several dozen pieces of Level 30 Gold-grade equipment with decent properties. It was absolutely worth Nie Yan exchanging a few pieces for a full set of Level 20 Thief equipment.

“Level 30 equipment...” Tuoba was in shock. Even Withered Leaf didn’t have a full set of Level 30 equipment, only a few odd parts lying here and there. He suddenly recalled, “Right! I nearly forgot! Your guild leader is Level 26. I’ve heard he trains on Level 30 mobs, so it’s not strange for you guys to have a complete set of Level 30 equipment. If you’re willing to exchange a full set of Level 30 Gold-grade equipment, Withered Leaf will give you some money to make it a fair trade.”

“Can I ask you a question? What’s the highest level player at Withered Leaf?” Nie Yan wondered why he hadn’t seen any signs of Withered Leaf on the leaderboards all this time.

“The highest is Level 25. They’re different from us. They spend all day running the main dungeons, but they’re not as high of a level as they could be since they’ve wiped plenty of times trying to clear dungeons on Specialist. It’s fine though. If they level too quickly, their gear won’t be able to keep up, so they’ll eventually slow down anyway. Don’t be mistaken, though, their levelling speed is still pretty fast. It’ll probably take only two or three days for most of them to hit Level 26. They’d rather focus on finding out how to clear certain dungeons on Specialist, so they don’t attach any importance to levelling. I bet the top people on the leaderboards like Kill Love and Sleepy Fox are the same. Even Heaven Breaker probably isn’t focusing everything into levelling,” Tuoba explained. Based on his own ability, he’d probably only rank around the top three at Withered Leaf.

These gaming organizations focused on reaping a profit. Since their goals were different from players like Nie Yan, there was no conflict of interest. They were professional players. That meant if he was willing to spend the money, he could even hire them to do

work for him.

Speaking truthfully, all of the Specialist dungeons guides from his past life had come from the efforts of the top gaming organizations. Only these keen-sighted players, who were fully dedicated to the game, could research all the various, meticulous ways to clear a dungeon. If he recalled correctly, it was a Withered Leaf player that had shown everyone it was possible to clear Sosil Valley at only Level 5 in his past life. The video released as proof on the official website had made many people sigh with admiration.

Tuoba gave a call to someone from Withered Leaf. When he finished talking, he turned to Nie Yan and said, “It’s called the Eternal Night of Silence Set. I’ve already asked them to send it over. I told them you wanted to trade with a set of Level 30 Gold-grade equipment. They said that’s fine, and they’ll cover the rest with money.”

The Eternal Night of Silence Set? Nie Yan’s mind trembled. It was a top-notch Level 20 Thief set that could only be found by running the Sorens Dungeon on Expert. If he put it on, his levelling speed would improve by a considerable amount. After retrieving the Chapter of Justice, it was about time he started focusing on raising his level again anyway.

“One more thing, the guy I’m talking to also said he wants to meet you. He’s the head of Withered Leaf,” Tuoba said, taking Nie Yan by surprise. What did the head of Withered Leaf want to do with him?

Chapter 182 – Fierce Person

The head of Withered Leaf was called [Aqua Smoke Stub](#). He ranked third among all professional players, even higher than Kill Love. For the vast majority of players, such an esteemed figure could only be heard about, never seen. Unlike other famous players like Sleepy Fox and Kill Love, he always stayed relatively low-key, but that didn't mean he was any less ambitious. He simply walked a different path from them.

There's actually a pun here. His name, 水色菸頭 , literally translates to Water Color Smoke/Cigarette Head. The “smoke” character (菸) in his name can also be read as “withered leaf.” So his name can also be read as Aqua Withered Leaf Head.

His operations in Conviction didn't expand beyond creating a top-tier elite team, which took on various tasks from large financial groups, including completing quests and clearing dungeons.

They didn't discriminate between enemy and ally. As long as the employer was willing to spend the money, they were willing to take on any task. According to hearsay, the Withered Leaf gaming organization generated immense sums of money for the Tuoba Financial Group every day.

“Tell him not today. We can chat when I get back to the city,” Nie Yan said. Logically speaking, a set of Level 30 Gold-grade equipment wasn't enough to attract the attention of the head of Withered Leaf. Was it possibly something else...?

“Impressive...” Tuoba gazed at Nie Yan with a somewhat

dissatisfied look. Any guild leader would be wild with joy if they heard Smoke Stub wanted to meet with them. Withered Leaf was indeed a formidable organization, but its interests lied elsewhere, so they didn't often come in conflict with the guilds. In a situation where there were only merits and no demerits, who wouldn't want to rope in such an ally? Yet, he had actually directly refused.

Tuoba told Withered Leaf of Nie Yan's reply.

Not long after, Nie Yan suddenly received a call from Withered Leaf. Wryly smiling, he pressed accept.

「How are you? I'm Smoke Stub.」An air of dignity lurked within his gentle tone.

From Nie Yan's recollection, Smoke Stub was a fierce person who was very protective of his own people. In the previous timeline, a guild had killed a member of Withered Leaf. In retaliation, not only did Smoke Stub ruin that guild's business connections, he also led an army to directly seize their stronghold. The massacre that followed remained fresh in the minds of players even long after the event, as well as the declaration that he made to everyone present: "Whoever touches the people of my Withered Leaf should be prepared to lose not only their life but everything else!" The reputation of Withered Leaf grew immensely after that.

Nie Yan thought Smoke Stub was going to be a bandit-type character like Heaven Breaker, aggressive and overbearing. He didn't expect him to be so soft-spoken and polite.

「Uh, hello...」Nie Yan answered, trying to guess why Smoke Stub was so impatient to reach him.

「Kill Love and I have some dealings together, so I know about the Union of Assassins. Name a price, I'd like to request a prince role in the union.」Smoke Stub got straight to the point. Even a blind man could easily spot the bright future that lay ahead of the union. If he could enter such an organization, it would be very helpful to the growth of Withered Leaf. Another point of concern was that if he didn't take the initiative to join now, he couldn't say for sure that a lot of potential work later on wouldn't be snatched away from them. No matter how strong Withered Leaf was, there was no way it could contend against such a large syndicate of professional players. Even now, a mere several days after its inception, it had far surpassed Withered Leaf in manpower.

Nie Yan finally cleared the mystery. It seemed Smoke Stub had found out about the Union of Assassins from Kill Love. Smoke Stub could've easily joined the organization on the basis that Withered Leaf wasn't much weaker than Battle Crazy Alliance, but he required the prince role for them to gain any sort of strong foothold later on.

Kill Love knew what Smoke Stub wanted, but the matter was out of his hands. He simply didn't have the authority to give out the prince role. Even so, Withered Leaf was an important business partner to Battle Crazy Alliance. If they could join, business in the Union of Assassins would rise by at least several fold, not to mention the significant boost in manpower. Kill Love would never go as far as to reject Withered Leaf, so he threw the ball in Nie Yan's court.

「Don't worry, I promised Kill Love I wouldn't leak your identity,」Smoke Stub added, hoping to dispel any potential doubts.

「I can assign you the prince role, but I'd like you to listen to my request,」Nie Yan answered after some deliberation. Since the head of Withered Leaf had sought him out, why not take advantage of the opportunity to make them fight for him?

「Speak, I'll accept if I think the request is reasonable,」Smoke Stub replied. Withered Leaf operated on the principle of equivalent exchange. They never made a loss in any business deal.

「I want Withered Leaf to become a part of my guild.」Nie Yan purposely made a ridiculous demand in order to gauge Smoke Stub's reaction.

「Impossible,」Smoke Stub directly refused. Withered Leaf only had so much business because they didn't join with any camp, even if they had relations. They would lose many clients if they entered Asskickers United.

「There's plenty of clients in the Union of Assassins. The business you'd lose from joining my guild would be negligible at that point,」Nie Yan pointed out, as if he knew exactly what Smoke Stub was thinking. The gap between him and Heaven Breaker would instantly close by a wide margin if he could recruit such an influential figure to his side. However, he also understood that his guild was too weak right now. It didn't have any appeal to Smoke Stub. Withered Leaf might be a neutral entity for the time being, but he knew several years from now, they would become an important force under Cao Xu's control. In this life, he was

determined to prevent that from happening. Instead, he planned to bind them to his ship, bit by gradual bit.

「It's temporarily impossible.」Smoke Stub shook his head.

「Fine, have Withered Leaf join Asskickers United for one month. We'll buy any surplus equipment you wish to sell at market price. In exchange, any Honour that Withered Leaf earns from running dungeons on Specialist will go to my guild. We won't interfere with your business either. After the month is over, we can discuss any further cooperation. How does that sound?」Nie Yan proposed. Since it was contracted work, and they could keep doing business the same as before, Smoke Stub would probably have a bit of an easier time agreeing.「One other thing, I want to have some promising individuals in my guild accompany your team during dungeon runs. Naturally, there'll be compensation.」

A lot of players in his guild showed great potential. If they could gain experience by observing the seasoned professional players in Withered Leaf, they would develop even faster.

Smoke Stub silently deliberated for a good while. The offer wasn't bad. Withered Leaf's business could continue unimpeded, and Asskickers United would also settle the problem of excess equipment. From an objective standpoint, the deal was only beneficial. Although it would be slightly inconvenient babysitting newcomers—especially if they didn't understand anything and ended up dragging the team down—he understood that he needed to make some concessions for the other side to agree to giving him the prince role in the Union of Assassins. Besides, he could just tell the players Nie Yan sent his way to stay in the back and do nothing

but watch.

The matter was crucial to the future of Withered Leaf; Smoke Stub naturally had to ponder over it carefully.

A while later, Smoke Stub finally decided,「I agree to your proposal. Let's sign a contract.」He had consulted the opinion of the person directly above his head in the Tuoba Financial Group.

The Tuoba Family seemed interested in the power behind Asskickers United's sudden rise to prominence.

「Head to the Asskickers United guild headquarters. Watchful Snail will process you guys into the guild,」Nie Yan replied. He was pleasantly surprised. Smoke Stub had agreed to the proposal. This was a great stroke of luck for his guild

Both parties signed and stamped their fingerprints on the contract. With the agreement taking effect, Nie Yan added Smoke Stub to the Union of Assassins. And so, the organization gained another prince.

It seemed the number of princes would increase in the future. There were many influential figures on the professional player rankings, so the Union of Assassins would definitely attract more organizations like Withered Leaf. However, aside from the founders, the people who followed wouldn't receive any shares.

Not long after Smoke Stub entering, a string of notices of other

players joining appeared in the chat.

Withered Leaf Fashionable has joined the Union of Assassins.

Withered Leaf Paper Sheet has joined the Union of Assassins.

...

More than six hundred players from Withered Leaf joined the Union of Assassins, bringing the total number of members to almost four thousand.

The addition of Withered Leaf was a great boon to the Union of Assassins which was already expanding at a rapid pace.

Nie Yan skimmed down the list of clients and agents. There were quite a few who had received the baron title by now. Among them was Hapless Frog, who had been in the organization for less than a day. Yet he was already approaching the rank of viscount. The main factor for his rise was that he had many good things to sell on the union's trading platform. With clients purchasing them and the union taking a small cut of every transaction, he quickly accumulated contribution points. After becoming a baron, there were clients who were willing to pay great sums of money for him to help them complete quests.

The profits from the Union of Assassins had already reached 50 gold. According to how the shares were divided up, Nie Yan would receive 30 gold, and this huge money-making machine was only beginning to get into gear.

Recently, Nie Yan had heard from Fa Lan, Sleepy Fox, and Kill Love that a venture capital was interested in purchasing the Union of Assassins. Naturally, they refused. They weren't fools. No matter what price was offered, they wouldn't hand over this golden goose to someone else. Besides, they needed Nie Yan's approval first.

After Nie Yan and Smoke Stub finalized the details of their cooperation, Smoke Stub brought all of the players from Withered Leaf to the Asskickers United guild headquarters.

Their headquarters had just recently been upgraded to Tier 2. It was considerably more spacious than before. A steady stream of players flowed in and out of the entrance, with the lively vigour of a newly emerged guild on full display.

“Boss, I’m here to hand in a mission!”

“Me too!”

A group of players surrounded Zhao Li. He was in charge of handing out guild missions and giving out the rewards for completing them. For example, if the Starry Night Potion Shop required a certain type of medicinal herb, he would give out a mission asking members to collect it, with the reward being a certain amount of merit points based on contribution.

“Is Watchful Snail here?” a voice called out from outside the entrance gates of the guild headquarters.

The Asskickers United players all looked over. A crowd of several dozen players stood outside the entrance. The tidy sets of equipment they wore all looked to be least Gold-grade and reflected a dazzling, metallic lustre. The surrounding guild members drew in a breath of cold air. What an intimidating group of people!

Chapter 183 – Ash Cloaked Heretics

The crowd of players stepped through the entrance, promptly arranging themselves in an orderly fashion within the courtyard. They were an entourage of Warriors, all armed to the teeth, with an awe-inspiring appearance. The person at the center was the tallest among them, as well as the owner of the voice who had called out earlier. This was Aqua Smoke Stub, a brawny man in his thirties. He was clad in dark golden armour with a horned helmet over his head. He radiated an imposing aura which made people feel a heavy, oppressive pressure.

If the guild members of Asskickers United encountered one or two people in full sets of Gold-grade armour walking down the streets of Calore, they usually wouldn't feel particularly amazed, aside from the slight gaze of envy. After all, anyone who could wear a full-set of Gold-grade armour was a top-tier player in the game.

But now, several dozen such players had appeared right on their doorstep! How could they not be surprised?

“Excuse me, may I ask why you're looking for Watchful Snail...?” Zhao Li stepped out to receive them. He couldn't help but feel a little apprehensive. He had never seen such a large band of formidable players before. A crowd of players showing up in full sets of Gold-grade equipment... this was practically telling everyone that they were here to pick a fight!

The guild members around Zhao Li also felt nervous. They whispered among each other, trying to guess the purpose of the

other party's visit.

Who knew where this mysterious group of players had cropped up from?

“Hey, Boss. Where do you think these guys came from...?” a guild member beside Zhao Li whispered into his ear in a nervous tone.

Zhao Li shook his head in response. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“We’re here to join your guild. Tell him to hurry up and come out,” Smoke Stub announced.

As if a single stone had triggered a thousand waves, his words created a huge disturbance among the guild members in the area.

Heavens! This intimidating lot of players had actually come here to join the guild? The guild members closest to Smoke Stub’s group stared on in shock. The armour they wore was so dazzling, it made everyone feel a little faint.

“Please wait a moment. He’ll be with you shortly,” Zhao Li said after finally calming down.

“The commanding leader is here.”

Guo Huai arrived less than a minute later, having rushed over to

the guild headquarters from elsewhere in Calore.

“I’m really sorry for not arriving here sooner. I was busy applying for a guild quest,” Guo Huai said apologetically to Smoke Stub.

“It’s fine. You can start adding us to the guild now,” Smoke Stub replied, waving his hand.

“Alright.” Before Guo Huai got to work, he turned to the surrounding guild members and shouted, “What are you all standing around for? Go off and level!”

The crowd of spectating guild members quickly dispersed. Some of them were given yet another shock when they walked out of the guild headquarters, only to see several hundred players on standby in the plaza outside. There were players of every class, all arranged in neat, orderly ranks. The equipment they wore was bright and colourful. Although they couldn’t compare to those people inside, anyone could tell with a glance that they weren’t run-of-the-mill players. Evidently, they were all part of the same group.

What was going on today? Why were so many strong players suddenly joining their guild?

It was as if an exhibition of high-quality equipment was being held in the plaza. As the ordinary guild members squeezed out of the headquarters to check out what was going on, they were all filled with an indescribable sense of joy and amazement.

After a while, notices began popping up in the guild chat.

Aqua Smoke Stub has joined the guild.

Withered Leaf Fashionable has joined the guild.

Before long, notices flooded the entire screen. These new people were all assigned to a sub-group called Withered Leaf. After putting two and two together, some of the more knowledgeable guild members immediately recognized them. Surprisingly, the third-ranked person on the professional player rankings, Aqua Smoke Stub, had decided to join Asskickers United with all of his subordinates in Withered Leaf! This was quite an unexpected development since the reputation of their organization alone was more than enough to establish a formidable guild themselves.

The guild members all began wondering just what sort of background their guild leader possessed. For him to recruit all of Withered Leaf into the guild... this wasn't something that could be accomplished merely with wealth!

Withered Leaf joining caused a huge stir in the guild. From the moment they entered, they could sense the explosive pace of the guild's development. As for whether it would grow to rival a goliath like Victorious Return in the future, not only them but every player in the guild was waiting to find out.

After entering the guild, Smoke Stub was surprised to see the

treasury filled with so many pieces of Level 30 Silver and Gold-grade equipment. He didn't expect them to have collected so much high-level equipment.

"Your treasury is pretty well-stocked," Smoke Stub praised. He didn't think a fledgling like Asskickers United could establish a treasury that impressed even the likes of him. From his point of view, the quality of this treasury didn't differ much from those of some larger guilds.

Thanks to the great effort put in by the guild members, along with the continued support from the Starry Night Potion Shop, Guo Huai could hardly imagine the resources and manpower that had to be spent to get the treasury to where it was now. It was full of all types of equipment, with no less than two thousand pieces in total, and at least another three thousand were currently being used by the players in the guild.

"Nirvana Flame told me he would buy all of the equipment you don't need at market price to bolster our guild treasury," Guo Huai said. Withered Leaf and Asskickers United were only temporarily collaborating. With the formidable financial backing of the Starry Night Potion Shop, he spoke in a tone full of confidence.

Smoke Stub sent Guo Huai a trade request, then said, "We only have one hundred and sixty pieces of Silver and Gold-grade equipment for now." He estimated that the value of the equipment should at least be 30 gold. Very few guilds at this time were able to take out such a sum at once. He was trying to probe out the other side's financial resources.

“According to the market price, the total comes to 32 gold,” Guo Huai replied. He was startled by the quality of each piece of equipment. The strength of Withered Leaf really couldn’t be looked down on.

Smoke Stub nodded. The price Guo Huai gave could be considered fair.

Guo Huai put in 32 gold in the trade window, and the two people hit confirm on the trade.

Afterwards, Guo Huai stored all the equipment in the treasury. These pieces of high-quality equipment, ranging from Level 15–20, would surely ignite the enthusiasm of the guild members.

Seeing them take out 32 gold at once, and only for the sake of padding the treasury, Smoke Stub gained a newfound awareness of the financial ability of Asskickers United. At least in terms of wealth, he had to concede that Withered Leaf was far behind them.

It seemed that he had seriously underestimated Asskickers United before. Maybe they really did have the potential to rival Victorious Return.

Guo Huai began the process of adding all the Withered Leaf players to the guild. This kept him busy all the way until afternoon, whereupon he notified Nie Yan with a message.

Withered Leaf didn’t let joining Asskickers United affect their

business. They only stayed in the guild headquarters for a short while before returning to their own matters. Aside from running dungeons, there was still a lot of other work that needed to be attended to.

With how efficiently Withered Leaf ran dungeons, Asskickers United was sure to be promoted to a Level 3 guild in no time.

Nie Yan was advancing deeper into the Light Monastery with Tuoba and Forthright when he suddenly received the update from Guo Huai. He faintly smiled. With the addition of Withered Leaf, the strength of Asskickers United would rise up another stage, directly closing in on Victorious Return. Although there was the possibility of Withered Leaf leaving after the month was over, when that time arrived, he would naturally have many more methods to keep them around.

“I didn’t think you’d actually pull Withered Leaf into your guild. Impressive!” Tuoba had gotten the information from his contacts in Withered Leaf. He was very surprised because he understood the principles of the organization very well. So them joining Asskickers United was completely outside of his expectations.

“The only goal of Withered Leaf is making a profit. They only joined the guild because I struck a deal with them,” Nie Yan vaguely explained. His involvement with the Union of Assassins had to be kept a secret. “As for what kind of deal, sorry, but I can’t divulge that to you guys,” he said with an apologetic smile.

“It’s fine, we understand,” Tuoba said, nodding his head. As a person who came from the long-standing Tuoba Family Financial

Group, he understood that some secrets couldn't be told to even the closest of friends. As for what kind of closed-door deals Withered Leaf were making, he had no right to be privy to such information, unless his old man was willing to tell him.

The three had cleared out almost a thousand Red Cloaked Heretics on their path. Forthright and Tuoba acted as the core of the group, tanking most of the damage and killing the most monsters. As for Nie Yan, other than killing mobs, he occasionally used Steal on them—earning himself a little extra income. Money aside, he also managed to find a few interesting trinkets.

Green Crystal Fragments

Description: Collect 10 to form a Green Crystal Quartz.

Green Crystal Quartz

Effects: unknown.

Nie Yan recalled that Green Crystals were used in the production of weapons and Tinkerer items. The level of the material was very high. It could only be used at around Level 50 or 60. Green Crystal Quartz was quite valuable, so he had kept all of these Green Crystal Fragments. Checking his bag, he had collected a little over twenty so far. They could be fused to create two Green Crystal Quartz. But he had to find an Advanced Blacksmith in order to do so. He had to pay quite a bit for the processing fee as well.

The three had killed their way to the winding entrance hall which led to the central hall of the Light Monastery. They saw three Ash Cloaked Heretics up ahead. These were Mage-type monsters. Their appearances were concealed under ash-gray robes, so that none could see what they truly looked like. They had crooked spines, and held both hands out in front of them like beggars. But instead of emptiness, their palms were home to hovering orbs of ghastly red flame.

These Ash Cloaked Heretics were high-level monsters.

“They look like Elites. Let me take a look,” Nie Yan said. He was the only person capable of identifying these Ash Cloaked Heretics.

“Be careful.”

Nie Yan showed a calm smile. He remembered that these Ash Cloaked Heretics were Level 32 Elites. This was probably as far as Forthright and Tuoba could go, but he had a way to narrowly slip past them and explore deeper into the Light Monastery.

Nie Yan took cover behind a nearby pillar. He carefully snuck over, concealing his figure. He was roughly twenty meters away from the nearest Ash Cloaked Heretic.

Faintly sensing his presence, the Ash Cloaked Heretics grew a little restless.

Nie Yan activated Disappear, making himself much harder to detect.

The three Ash Cloaked Heretics, no longer sensing an intruder, reverted back to a passive state.

Nie Yan inspected them with Transcendent Insight.

Ash Cloaked Heretic (Elite): Level 32

Health: 3,500/3,500

They didn't have much health in comparison to other Elites, but as Mage-type monsters, their damage was extremely frightening.

Chapter 184 – Splitting Edge

“Those Ash Cloaked Heretics are Level 32 Elites,” Nie Yan informed. He reappeared in front of Tuoba and Forthright after sneaking back.

“Level 32 Elites...? We definitely can’t deal with them.” Tuoba wrinkled his brows. It was impossible for them to deal with three Level 32 Elites with their current line up. He estimated they’d all be wiped out after a single round of spells.

“Should we head back and find some more party members?” Forthright asked, putting away the greatsword in his hand.

“No, let those bunch of scoundrels be. They definitely won’t come. All of the Withered Leaf players are preoccupied with running dungeons. I’m guessing they probably won’t have any free time until the day after tomorrow. Besides, we’re going to have to log off in thirty minutes anyway. So let’s call it a day. We’ll bring more people with us next time,” Tuoba suggested after checking the server time.

“You’re right. There isn’t enough time left today,” Nie Yan said. Thirty minutes wasn’t long enough for him to explore the central hall. He was better off finding a safe place to log out.

“Are you planning to return to Calore?” Tuoba glanced at Nie Yan and asked.

Nie Yan shook his head. “I’m going to explore a bit deeper before

logging off.”

“Really? You still want to go further inside?” Forthright asked in surprise. Exploring the depths of the Light Monastery by himself... was he looking to die?

Tuoba was also bewildered. Although Nie Yan’s strength could be considered decent, he absolutely was not a match for these Elites.

“Don’t forget, I’m a Thief.” Nie Yan smirked.

Tuoba stared blankly, then let out a clear laugh. “You’re right, I almost forgot!”

The Thief class had the innate advantage of being able to go where other classes couldn’t. An ordinary Thief absolutely wouldn’t dare to explore particularly dangerous areas, but Tuoba made the mistake of judging Nie Yan as an ordinary Thief.

Tuoba and Forthright had witnessed Nie Yan’s capabilities for themselves. Maybe he really could sneak into the central hall by relying on his skills.

“If you find any Paladin equipment, save them for me,” Tuoba said. He was a bit impressed by Nie Yan for daring to explore such a dangerous place.

“Me too! I need Warrior equipment,” Forthright loudly chimed in from the side.

“I’m just going inside to take a look. I can’t guarantee that I’ll be able to bring anything back,” Nie Yan replied. He was also going there for the sake of retrieving the Chapter of Justice. As for other things, they’d be truly difficult to obtain. But who could know for certain? He might just find some amazing treasure inside.

“No problem, just keep it in mind. We’ll be heading back now,” Tuoba said. There was no point in them staying here any longer.

“Mhm, sure!” Nie Yan nodded. Tuoba and Forthright definitely couldn’t progress any further today, unless they were somehow able to bring some people back here to clear out the Ash Cloaked Heretics in a short span of time.

“See ya later, pal! Remember to get me a few pieces of Warrior equipment,” Forthright said with a wide grin.

“Don’t worry. If I find any Warrior equipment, I’ll definitely save them for you.” Nie Yan chuckled. He felt Forthright’s character truly matched his name, straightforward and without any hidden schemes. He had a good impression of Tuoba and Forthright. They were certainly people worth befriending.

Although Nie Yan had reincarnated, he didn’t feel his skills would allow him to triumph over everyone. Even so, having knowledge of the future possessed one very large advantage—and that was the ability to recruit various heaven-defying talents to his side. With Tuoba and Forthright in the guild, Asskickers United gained two more experts.

Taking out a Return Scroll each, Tuoba and Forthright began activating them. Twenty seconds later, they were whisked away with two brilliant flashes of light.

Nie Yan glanced at the ceiling of the monastery. He spotted wooden beams about five meters above his head. They were carved with all sorts of designs which looked detailed and elegant on closer inspection. If he wanted to get past those three Elites, he had no choice but to climb over them by using the ceiling beams. However, there was too little time, and it was dangerous for him to log off in the central hall. He left the corridor to do a bit of grinding outside. After which he found a safe spot to go offline.

Setting aside the game helmet on top of his bedside table, Nie Yan walked out of his room to discover numerous large boxes sealed with tape blocking the hallway. It seemed much of the furniture and items in the house had already been packed away.

Nie Yan's mother called out to him after spotting him walk out of the room. "Little Yan, we're going to move to the city in two days. Your dad just registered his own company, so we're moving closer to his office. We're planning to transfer you to a high-class prep school in the city as well. I hear they'll be able to teach you a few things you can't learn here, and you'll get a better education. When you have the time, you should say goodbye to your classmates."

"Sure, I understand. Mom, let me help you pack." His mother's words reminded him of the previous timeline. His father had moved the whole family to the capital around this time as well.

While helping his mother pack, Nie Yan heard his father writing away in the study room. He guessed it probably had something to do with the company.

Summer vacation was coming to an end, and the new school year was about to start. Nie Yan thought of Xie Yao. He'd finally get to meet her again. He wasn't sure what she was up to lately. An intense sense of longing washed over him, like the pleasant burning sensation of a strong spirit going down his throat as he recalled her pleasant smile in his mind.

It had been ten long years—an entire lifetime for him even, yet the feelings he had for her never faded. In fact, they had only grown stronger over time.

During his last year of high school, his heart had been thoroughly snatched away by her. But back then, he had been a hopeless coward, muddleheaded and incapable of confessing his love. All he could do was hide behind a corner and timidly sneak glances at her. Yet the fact that he could even catch a glimpse of her every day left him content to go about his complacent life.

This life, however, would be different. He would never repeat the same, disastrous mistakes.

Nie Yan helped his mother pack away various household items. Anything that they needed would be stored inside a box.

“Mom, we don't need to bring these things. We won't have any

use for them anyway.” Nie Yan pointed at a medium-sized box full of antiques. He remembered that in his past life, all they did was collect dust and take up space in the basement of their villa.

“It’s no problem. We can bring a little extra. I’m fine storing them in the basement. We could probably put some of them on display,” Nie Yan’s mother replied with a faint smile, a hint of nostalgia in her voice. She wore an expression full of reminiscence as she took out some of the items from the box to examine.

Spotting the wrinkles that had formed near his mother’s eyes as she smiled, Nie Yan was beset with a feeling of melancholy. His mother had grown old before he even realized. She got engaged with his father when she was in her early twenties, giving birth to him less than a year later. Afterwards, his father left to serve in the army for five years, but she had never once complained. When the family reunited later on, they lived in constant poverty. She toiled endlessly from morning to late evening every day to help support the household. Her youth quickly faded away. Yet despite the bitter hardship, she went about her life with no complaints.

Even when the family became wealthy later on, the relationship between his parents had always stayed strong.

His father very rarely expressed his feelings, but he was a man who deeply cared for his family, an aspect about him that Nie Yan respected the most.

Shabby as those items may be, he now understood why his mother wanted to bring them along. They carried the memories of the past and a lifetime of countless trials and tribulations, when

she along with his father struggled to create a family. Even though those times were full of hardship, they represented a simple kind of happiness.

Recalling that his mother had suffered even more hardship in the previous timeline, partially because of him, Nie Yan couldn't help but feel guilty. A strong desire to take responsibility arose from deep within his heart. Whoever dared to encroach on the happiness of his parents in this life, he'd make sure they would forever disappear from the world.

"Your Uncle Lin and his family will also move with us. We bought a large villa on the outskirts of the city. It's quite spacious," his mother warmly explained after noticing that he had gone silent.

"I understand." Nie Yan nodded and smiled. He carefully packed away all of his mother's things, wrapping them in cloth to prevent them from getting damaged to some extent before storing them in a box.

"Your father is planning to give some shares of his new company to your Uncle Lin and Uncle Liu, my youngest brother; your cousin, Ah Chen; and some of our other relatives. Although our situation has gotten a lot better, we mustn't forget those who've helped us out. Remember, if it weren't for them, who knows where our family would be right now?" Nie Yan's mother earnestly reminded.

Nie Yan's father was a deeply sentimental man. He always kept in mind those who had treated his family well in the past. When his

father had asked Old Lin, Old Liu, and his youngest brother-in-law for money, they insisted on not taking interest. The people who did only agreed to because his father was being stubborn. Even then, it still wasn't very high.

As for Ah Chen, needless to say, he had done the most for the Nie family. Thanks to Ah Chen running all over the place on his father's behalf, the company could finally be started. So, naturally, he would receive the largest share of the company. As for Luo Ming and his group, they had acted no differently from loan sharks when his parents had asked to borrow money from them—not to mention they had hounded him on numerous occasions to pay back the debt despite knowing full-well that his parents weren't home. His parents were greatly disappointed that they had such contemptible relatives.

Suddenly, there was knocking on the front door.

As his mother got up to answer the door, Nie Yan quickly stopped her. Grabbing hold of her wrist, he shook his head and said, "Mom, no need... Let me go answer it instead."

Nie Yan was now much more thoughtful than he was in the past. His mother showed a gratified smile. She nodded her head and sat back down.

Nie Yan opened the door to the sight of who else but Luo Ming and his loathsome face?

"Little Yan, are your parents home?" Luo Ming asked with an

awkward yet somewhat ingratiating smile.

“Scram!” Nie Yan’s expression frosted over. Back then, his father had only given Luo Ming’s group some shares in the company because they had begged shamelessly. Who could’ve guessed that they’d plot against his father later on, leading to him committing suicide out of depression after losing all control of his company? He absolutely wouldn’t allow these events to repeat themselves in this life.

“How can you speak to me like that!? I’m your uncle!” Luo Ming attempted to use his seniority to restrain Nie Yan, but his confidence faltered after seeing the icy glint in Nie Yan’s eyes.

Just as Nie Yan was about to slam the door shut on Luo Ming, his mother’s voice came from behind. “Little Yan, who’s at the door?”

“Sis! It’s your big brother! Little Yan won’t let me in. I just want to talk for a bit. I’ll leave right after,” Luo Ming shamelessly called out.

Nie Yan’s mother furrowed her brows. “Little Yan, let him in.”

Although Nie Yan despised Luo Ming, he didn’t dare disobey his mother and stepped aside.

After Luo Ming entered the house, he was followed by his wife and the other relatives who clung onto him.

Luo Ming took a quick glance at the study room, then let out a forced laugh. “It seems my brother-in-law is pretty busy these days, huh?”

“What do you want? Speak.” Nie Yan’s mother thought back to the time when she and her husband asked them to borrow money. Luo Ming’s group treated them like strangers and even responded with hostility.

“About the matters in the past, we were in the wrong... Little Sister, don’t get angry at us. We came here today to apologize,” Luo Ming’s wife explained. Her grating voice sounded like a squawking duck, making her unpleasant to listen to.

“Sure, we acted coldly, but we still lent you the money. Now that you’ve gotten wealthy, you’re just going to hang us out to dry? How is that reasonable? You can argue your logic with anyone, and they’ll still say it doesn’t make any sense!” Nie Yan’s other aunt sneered.

“Little Yu’s words are a bit crass, but they’re still reasonable. A person mustn’t forget their roots!” Luo Ming’s wife added. It seemed one was tasked to play the role of a villain while the other played the role of the hero.

Nie Yan’s mother frowned. “You were more like loan sharks than family. When we asked you to borrow money, did you act like family?”

Luo Ming’s wife and the other aunt’s expressions flickered with

embarrassment.

“Based on your family’s financial situation at that time, who would dare to lend you money? Even real loan sharks wouldn’t take the risk of loaning you money. They wouldn’t believe that you’d be able to pay it back! It all worked out in the end, right? Well, you’re all well-off now. So you suddenly decide to cut all ties with us?” Luo Ming’s wife shouted in a harsh tone.

“Exactly! We can find anyone to be the judge! No one in the world would agree with your reasoning!” Nie Yan’s other aunt pitched in, adding more fuel to the fire.

“How is it fair that outsiders like Old Lin and Old Liu get shares in your company and we don’t!?” By now, Luo Ming started fuming.

Nie Yan’s mother was naturally mild-mannered. She wasn’t a match for the two aunts when it came to quarrelling, nor was she used to dealing with such a stream of slurs. Red-faced and teary eyed, she shouted, “Ask yourselves! Old Lin and Old Liu might be outsiders! But have you people ever treated our family as well as they have...?”

Nie Yan clenched his fists. Staring at their ugly, repulsive mugs, he wanted so badly to rush up and beat the tar out of them.

“Tell your husband to get the hell out here! If he gives us each a three percent share of his company, we’ll drop the matter! If he doesn’t, we’ll find people and let them judge!” Luo Ming

threatened, directing his voice toward the study room.

Nie Yan's father walked out of the study. He stared coldly at Luo Ming's group.

Luo Ming immediately shut up. He still felt a sense of dread toward this brother-in-law of his who served in the army.

"Are you just about done? Get out of my house! I don't care how many thugs you bring. You're not getting a cent out of my company." Nie Yan's father walked to his wife's side and wrapped his arm around her waist. This simple gesture was enough. Her shoulders dropped, relieved from the weight of a crushing burden. Tears rolled down her face as she leaned against her husband.

"Sister, we came here today to have a civil discussion, but your family is simply too out of line!" Luo Ming said, wrinkling his brows.

"Scram! If I hear any more nonsense out of you, I'll kick you of the house myself!" Nie Yan stared daggers at Luo Ming.

"Look at your son! Is that how you teach him to talk to his elders!?" Luo Ming's anger had reached its peak. His hand moved to slap Nie Yan's face. Lost in his rage, he forgot that Nie Yan was no longer the same cowardly boy he knew from the past.

Nie Yan recalled the unhappy experiences that he had with Luo Ming in his childhood. He had been beaten by Luo Ming more

times than he cared to remember, quite ruthlessly too. Many times, he'd been left with deep bruises. His mother would always burst into tears, her heart aching deeply whenever she saw the abuse that she was helpless to stop.

Nie Yan grabbed Luo Ming's wrist like a vice grip and fiercely twisted his arm backwards.

"Let go! Let go now!" Luo Ming screamed out in pain.

Nie Yan carried Luo Ming to the front of the house. Opening the door, he threw him out.

"Well, are you going to get the hell out? Or do I have to throw you out?" Nie Yan's eyes flashed with a hint of ruthlessness as he swept his gaze over Luo Ming's wife and the others. Ever since he had shot Cao Xu dead, he was no longer the same weak, timid boy.

Luo Ming's wife and the others were badly frightened by Nie Yan. They quickly vacated the premises while letting loose a stream of curses.

「Bang!」Nie Yan slammed the door shut.

"Mom, don't cry. They're not worth your tears." Nie Yan consoled his mother.

Although Nie Yan's father found his aggressive actions just a moment ago to be a little strange, he quickly realized something.

Presumably, while they were out of town, Nie Yan probably suffered quite a lot under the harassment of Luo Ming's group. It was only natural for him to change.

Nie Yan's mother seethed with anger. She felt helpless that she had such a man for an older brother.

Nie Yan spent the entire day helping his mother pack. As dusk approached, she went out to buy groceries in preparation for dinner. Soon, the whole family sat at the table, enjoying a warm meal.

"I've heard the prep school we're sending you to is very nice, but the academic requirements in the capital are much higher. Little Yan, keep up with your studies. You musn't fall behind your peers," Nie Yan's father patted him on the shoulders. His relationship with his father now seemed much closer in comparison to what it was in his past life.

"Yes, I'll try my best," Nie Yan replied, simply to please his parents. As for the need to actually study, passing his senior year of high school with full marks wouldn't be a problem.

"While I was out buying groceries, I heard Little Yu has been going around to our neighbours, telling them that we've forgotten our roots, and abandoned the relatives who've helped us after becoming rich,," Nie Yan's mother said, sounding quite vexed about the matter.

"Hmph! Let them prattle on. Clear is clear, and muddled is

muddled. As for who's in the right, anyone with a discerning eye can tell," Nie Yan's father said in an annoyed tone.

"Mom, Dad's right. Don't let them get to you," Nie Yan comforted.

Nie Yan chatted with his parents for a while after finishing his meal. They would be moving to the capital the day after tomorrow. After they settled down in their new home, school would start a few days later. Just the thought of being able to see Xie Yao again left him feeling somewhat excited. A stream of memories flooded his mind. He recalled that Xie Yao should still be single at this time. She wouldn't enter a relationship with Liu Rui until university. Even so, they were all going to be fellow students in the same school.

In other words, there was still a chance left for Nie Yan to win her heart. As he thought about this matter, Nie Yan's mood became complex. He entered his room and put on his virtual reality helmet.

As he logged back in the game, Nie Yan found himself near the respawned Ash Cloaked Heretics. Taking advantage of the spawn immunity from the opening of the server, he found a hidden place to blend into his surroundings, activating Stealth. From a safe position, he looked cautiously at the three Elites to confirm that they were still in the center of the hallway.

Nie Yan slowly advanced until he was directly beneath a ceiling beam. He shot a web line from his Silk Spinner Ring which stuck on the beam. Confirming that the line was secure, he jerked his

arm back as his body was flung upwards toward the ceiling. Once he neared the beam, he immediately activated the Crawler Ring and clung on. With the combined abilities of his two rings, he was more than capable of climbing under the beam like a spider.

Nie Yan hid behind the ceiling beam while still in stealth. He quietly crept right over the heads of the unsuspecting Ash Cloaked Heretics. Since they were still in their passive states, it was clear that they had yet to notice him crawling above them.

Nie Yan entered the central hall after getting past the Ash Cloaked Heretics. He was greeted by an ornate and magnificent room with a row of massive pillars on each side and a red carpet laid down the middle. The pillars in each row were about six meters apart from each other, with a hundred of them in total stretching far into the distance. Inside the hall were a few humanoid monsters in silver armor. They carried huge swords as they patrolled, and were clearly melee attackers.

On each side of the hall, in the far corners, a dark gold chest quietly flashed with a metallic light. Nie Yan's pulse suddenly started racing. These were dark gold chests!

He hadn't expected this hall to provide loot as good as two dark gold chests. This was the benefit of being a pioneer exploring a new area, because a latecomer would never be able to find these treasures. Ordinary chests would respawn after a random period of time, but dark gold chests would disappear forever!

Sadly, each chest had over a dozen monsters guarding it. Ignoring them for now, Nie Yan noticed that one of the patrolling

silver-armored monsters was about to reach his hiding spot behind a pillar.

Corrupted Silver Paladin (Elite): Level 33

Health: 5,000/5,000

These things have healing skills... that's annoying. Nie Yan continued his one-sided assault. This sort of monster usually had limited mana pools that could only sustain two or three spells at most. He'd have to deplete it of all of its mana before he could start dealing any meaningful damage.

If only I had a weapon with the Mana-Siphon property... With such a weapon, he'd be able to deplete the enemy's mana with every attack. It was the bane of Paladins, Priests, and Mages. Sadly, that sort of property only appeared on weapons of at least Sub Legendary-grade.

As the Corrupted Silver Paladin once again fell to low health, it cast another self-heal, restoring itself to fifty percent health. Apparently, it could only perform a Greater Heal once before only having enough mana to cast a Lesser Heal. Finally, under Nie Yan's unceasing assault, the monster's health fell bit by bit down to zero. At long last, the defeated corpse collapsed onto the ground.

Nie Yan had successfully killed a Corrupted Silver Paladin! Elated, he jumped down from his position five meters in the air and collected the loot dropped by the monster. The item was a rather special one.

Splitting Edge (Incomplete): 1/20

The Splitting Edge appeared here?! Nie Yan's heart thumped in shock and excitement. No one knew better than him just how amazing the Splitting Edge was. In his past life, he had used this exact weapon all the way until Level 60. Even though part of the reason for this was his inability to find a suitable replacement, the great properties of this weapon were still the main reason that he could use it for so long.

This very Splitting Edge was renowned as the best Thief weapon under Level 50!

Chapter 185 – Legend Of The Ten Holy Paladins

The fragment of Splitting Edge was a silver-white, rhombus-shaped shard of metal. Its surface was meticulously scored with shallow grooves, forming Yemos Runes which were named after their creator—Legendary Blacksmith Yemos. According to historical accounts, Yemos was still an Advanced Blacksmith when he first forged the Splitting Edge. Its blueprints would later be copied and passed down to a few, select Blacksmiths across the continent.

The Splitting Edge was a rare, low-level Charge Weapon which came with a supplementary skill. The charge referred to the fact that the weapon had to be charged to a certain extent for the skill to be activated, so the wielder couldn't abuse it as they pleased. After the skill was released, the weapon would be drained of its energy and the player would have to wait for it to slowly replenish.

While Charge Weapons could be found at higher levels, the Splitting Edge was the only available weapon of its kind for low-level Thief players, and it had amazing properties to boot. Outside of Sub-Legendary and Legendary weapons, it ranked as the number one Thief weapon below level 50. It was no wonder players nicknamed it the best [vegetable knife](#) in the game!

The character for vegetable in Chinese is slang for noob. So vegetable knife means noob weapon in this context.

In the previous timeline, Nie Yan at Level 39 had run the Blood Marsh over half-a-dozen times and spent over 3 gold in the loot auction in order to finally obtain twenty fragments of Splitting

Edge. He wasn't nearly as rich back then, so the endeavor had directly transformed him into a penniless wretch.

Under normal circumstances, Nie Yan would have to bring a task force of three twenty-man teams, composed entirely of Level 30 players, in order to clear out all the mobs in the central hall of the Light Monastery. However, since he had the Silk Spinner Ring and Crawler Ring, things were much simpler.

With several teams working together to clear out an area, a player who wanted a certain drop would have to divvy out money to everyone else in the group as compensation. Even then, they might not necessarily end up with it because others would undoubtedly be eyeing the same thing as well.

However, solo-clearing was different. All of the drops would belong to Nie Yan.

Who knows? Maybe after clearing out all the Corrupted Silver Paladins in this place, he'd have a complete Splitting Edge to himself.

Having taken down the Corrupted Silver Paladin, Nie Yan glanced at his experience bar. It had filled up to about 17%. These guys give pretty good experience. I guess this isn't a bad spot to do some levelling.

Nie Yan began the process of clearing out all the mobs in the area. He employed the same method as before, as a stream of crossbow bolts sent Corrupted Silver Paladins collapsing to the

floor one after another.

After killing his fifth Corrupted Silver Paladin, a bright radiance enveloped Nie Yan as he levelled up to Level 19.

He was fast approaching Level 20.

Nie Yan had collected five Splitting Edge fragments so far, one for each Corrupted Silver Paladin killed. He scanned up ahead. Many more were still left, especially around the two dark gold chests. Both chests were surrounded by hosts of monsters.

The drop rate for fragments is decent.

「Thud!」Another Corrupted Silver Paladin collapsed. Walking to its corpse, Nie Yan picked up a piece of equipment and a small book.

Paladin's Prayer (Quest Item)

Description: Carry the Paladin's Prayer with you on your journey to seek out the true fates of the Ten Holy Paladins. You will uncover astonishing truths.

Quest 1 – Kavana's Death

Description: Brewin succumbed to his ambitions after the

death of Kavana. He abandoned his faith; and so began a merciless massacre, the former hero turned his blade against his comrades.

Objectives

- ☐ Find Kavana's corpse.
- ☐ Retrieve his Paladin Medal.

The Paladin Medals represented the glory of the Ten Holy Paladins—Kavana, Brewin, Bertrand, Kramer, Crispim, Sandeman, Clive, Hayzelden, Bassil, and Chadwell. When they brought their Paladin Medals together, they could make contact with the Archangel Tallod. According to lore, Tallod was still guarding the Gates of the Death Realm even though he hadn't made an appearance in nearly a millennium.

Paladin's Prayer was a slightly dilapidated, one-handed hammer with a seemingly ordinary appearance. However, Nie Yan could feel formidable divine power surging through his arm as held it in his hand.

Any other Paladin weapon paled in comparison to the might that radiated off this hammer.

A quest item... Nie Yan didn't know who completed the quest related to the Legend of the Ten Holy Paladins in his past life, nor was he knowledgeable of how it concluded. However, since it had to do with the lore in the game, he was certain the grade wasn't low.

As Nie Yan read through the quest summary, his eyebrows jumped in surprise. It was actually a Legendary quest!

Seems like this quest doesn't just end with the Light Monastery...

Nie Yan turned his focus to the book. It was somewhat damaged, but he could still make out the words on the cover as belonging to the Ancient Common Language. He deciphered the meaning of the silver-gilded characters.

「Legend of Kavana」

Nie Yan flipped open the book as large segments of ancient text greeted his eyes.

...Kavana revered the will of God, a devout follower of the Light, an Advanced Holy Paladin... Archangel Tallod: "Child, may the Light protect you..." ...Kavana encountered Brewin, Bertrand, and many others like him. They fought bravely and valiantly against the atrocities committed by the dragons while enacting the will of Light. So began the Legend of the Ten Holy Paladins in the Glennin province... The appearance of the young dragon girl, Benita, created a rift in the group... Kavana set her free, returning her to Karud... Kavana's corpse lay in the central hall of the Light Monastery. Even in his eternal rest, he desired everlasting light for all...

The rest of the text was too damaged to read any further.

The book had simply gone too long without proper care. Nie Yan

could only make out intermittent sections of the text. His only option was to make an educated guess. Kavana and Brewin were joint leaders of the Ten Holy Paladins. They fought back against the dragons together. The group later captured a defenseless dragon girl. Kavana insisted on releasing Benita, but others in the group opposed this. The disagreement led to the Ten Holy Paladins disbanding. Kavana died later on, and the ambitious Brewin began massacring the other members of the group.

The story goes on from there.

Kavana's corpse was laid to rest in the central hall of the Light Monastery... Nie Yan climbed up a pillar and surveyed the place from a higher vantage point. At the end of the hall, on top of a white stone platform above a long flight of stairs, he spotted a giant crystal coffin. So Kavana's final resting place is over there?

I should clear out all the mobs here first. 「Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!」Nie Yan shot at a nearby Corrupted Silver Paladin, drawing its aggro. It rushed over but could only helplessly circle around the pillar as he let loose a steady stream of bolts.

Nie Yan suddenly received a message from Tang Yao.

「Where are you right now?」Tang Yao asked.

「Light Monastery.」

「What are you doing all the way over there!?!」Tang Yao was

shocked. He remembered that the Light Monastery was a Level 30–35 map. Guo Huai and the other higher-ups had actually played around with the idea of exploring the map with several twenty-man teams. However, the matter was left unsettled in the end. After all, these sorts of expeditions would entail enormous risks. The guild simply couldn't afford a huge loss in manpower. It was better to wait for all of the Priests to learn Revive first. At that time, they could go there whenever they wanted.

「I'm doing a quest. How's levelling?」

「After I got to Level 26, my levelling speed slowed down by a lot, and Heaven Breaker is catching up fast...」Tang Yao said, sounding quite vexed. Heaven Breaker was probably going to hit Level 26 soon. He wasn't confident in being able to preserve his number one spot.

「Wait for me to come out. I'll take you guys to some other place to train. What about Yao Yao and Sun? What level are they?」

「Both of them are Level 24.」

Yao Yao and Sun had risen in level pretty quickly. Of course, with Tang Yao tirelessly grinding mobs, their levelling speeds naturally wouldn't be slow.

「How long before you come out?」

「I'd say a few hours or so. I'll be finished by then,」Nie Yan

replied. He estimated two hours would be enough for him to clear out all of the Corrupted Silver Paladins.

「Alright, I hope sooner than later.」

It would be a heavy blow to Asskickers United if Tang Yao couldn't maintain his position at the top of the leaderboards.

Nie Yan checked the Starry Night Potion Shop's overview window. He had already accrued over 300 gold, which after accounting for inflation was roughly equal to 100 gold from when the game first released. With the average level of the playerbase rising, players had much more money to spend, so the consumption of consumables also gradually increased. The amount of business the shop received naturally followed accordingly, from earning about 50 gold a day when it first opened to almost 200 gold now. This was a huge step forward. Even though daily operational costs were quite high, the profits raked in every day were even higher!

Since he was in no short supply of gold, there was no harm in buying a few Junior Magic Bombs.

A batch of bombs was priced at 20 gold, slightly expensive, but he was just able to bear the cost.

When Nie Yan got back, he planned to take Tang Yao with him to the Everlasting City. Although it was a Level 40 map, they wouldn't face any problems levelling there with the help of the Junior Magic Bombs.

Just as Nie Yan was about to continue clearing out the Corrupted Silver Paladins, he received a notification that made his heart sink. The matter he was most anxious about had finally happened!

Black Hell has obtained the fifth chapter from Volume I of the Book of Order, Chapter of Equality. You will be notified of the player's updated location once every hour.

Coordinates: Link Town, 385.382.582.

A player had gotten the Chapter of Equality!

By coming into possession of the chapter, Black Hell was also able to see Nie Yan's location. It was the same in his past life as well. Every chapter owner was pitted against each other to determine who all the chapters would belong to in the end.

Nie Yan and Black Hell would inevitably face off!

In the previous timeline, chapter owners resorted to all sorts of unscrupulous means to seize the chapters from their rivals: traps, ganging up, ambushes, assassination, putting up bounties, and so on.

Even so, all six chapters had never fallen into the hands of one person in his past life. At best, two chapters came into the possession of a single person while four others owned a chapter

each.

After being left untouched for so long, the dusty history books of the Atlanta continent would open once more to record the feats of the current generation.

Both sides could spy on each other. This was a dangerous game. You couldn't predict when or where your rival might appear in front of you and launch a surprise attack.

You couldn't stay in one place for too long. Otherwise, your rivals would lock onto your position.

If it was only one versus one, Nie Yan was confident in winning. However, if the opponent brought a bunch of people to surround him, then it would be hard to say who would come out on top,

Thankfully, Nie Yan was a Thief. He had a certain class advantage when it came to fleeing. As for Black Hell, he still didn't know what class they played yet.

Anyone capable of retrieving a chapter from the Book of Order wasn't simple.

Nie Yan pondered for a moment. He would focus on retrieving the Chapter of Justice first. As for the remaining two chapters, one was in Black Hell's hands—giving him a definite target—while the other was still out in the wild. He needed to move quicker. Otherwise, things would become even more troublesome if the

Chapter of Honesty also fell into the hands of a player.

Chapter 186 – Holy Priest, Shadow Priest

A certain problem weighed on Nie Yan's mind; he had never heard of a player called Black Hell before, not even in his past life. He was completely in the dark regarding the opponent's strengths and weaknesses, and that would pose a risk to him if they ever clashed.

The Chapter of Harmony was reportedly meant for Priests. It substantially boosted the effects of all healing skills, something which was particularly useful for Holy Priests. As for Shadow Priests, it enhanced the effects of curses. Before being found, it was hidden in the Level 25 map, Murky Quagmire.

The Murky Quagmire was an extremely inhospitable map. It was the perfect breeding ground for Sludge Slimes—living beings made out of toxic goop, highly resistant to physical attacks, and reeked of an awful stench. It was also filled with poisonous gases, so players would take constant damage as soon as they entered. The only reliable method of preventing yourself from getting inflicted with the poisoned status was to regularly receive blessings from a Priest. Antidotes would work as well, but their preventive effect only lasted so long, not to mention the cost. As such, a party of five levelling here would generally consist of at least two Priests. Paladins could explore the map by themselves with some difficulty, but it was impossible for other classes.

On top of all that, the Chapter of Harmony was said to be hidden in the heart of the Murky Quagmire, the region where the poisonous gases were thickest. Even Nie Yan didn't know what lurked in there.

It wasn't the sort of place a group could explore at the current stage of the game, unless half of its members consisted of Priests. But if that was the case, who would deal all the damage?

Even if someone organized an expedition to explore the map, the group size couldn't exceed five players. At least two of the members had to be Priests while the stat requirements for everyone were very high.

The person who retrieved the Chapter of Harmony ultimately belonged to one of the following classes: Holy Priest, Shadow Priest, or Paladin. The chances of Black Hell being a Paladin weren't very high. After all, the Chapter of Harmony didn't have much of an effect on classes aside from the Priest, while only the Chapter of Justice corresponded to the Paladin class. So it was much more plausible that they played a Holy Priest or Shadow Priest

With the scope narrowed down by a large margin, Nie Yan tried hard to recall the properties of the Chapter of Harmony. Just in case it possessed some formidable abilities, he would be somewhat better prepared.

The first skill of the Chapter of Harmony was called Circle of Healing. It could instantly replenish the health of all team members in a certain range, and naturally, it was extremely useful in group battles. The second skill was called Empower Status Magic. It would bolster the effects of all blessings, while all curses would transform into something much more terrifying.

Therefore, the Chapter of Harmony was also known as Trial of Light and Darkness.

The Chapter of Harmony was fully deserving of being called one of the best items for Priests.

Nie Yan remembered that the owner of the Chapter of Harmony in the previous timeline was a Priest called Black Heaven, one of the Seven Archbishops. He was said to have joined Sapphire Shrine later on, becoming their Chief Priest.

Black Hell, Black Heaven...? These names are pretty close. Are they related to each other?

It seemed the opposing side didn't consist of just one person. The situation had become a lot more complicated. A powerful Priest could easily influence a bunch of people to join them. Those who were good at socializing would usually find themselves with many friends the moment they entered the game.

Nie Yan rubbed his temples. The only reason he had put off retrieving the Chapter of Harmony for so long was that he had no way of setting foot into the Murky Quagmire. He hadn't even been there in his past life, so he was completely unfamiliar with the map. Even if he wanted to go, he'd still have to bring a top-notch Priest like Leader Young Seven along with him. However, this undoubtedly entailed its own risks. A single Priest entering a Level 25 map... who knows what sort of trouble might pop up?

Any Priest that could reach that rank of Archbishop was an

extremely rare talent! In the stronghold sieges several years from now, an Archbishop would transform into a support machine of war. A single blessing could sharply increase the stats of a crowd of players. A single group heal could restore a crowd of low-health players back to full again. They grew even more perverse after learning the Divine Resurrection skill. It could revive a player without any restrictions or penalties!

Although the normal Revive skill could also bring a fallen comrade back to life, it wasn't free from drawbacks. Some players would lose experience. Others would revive in a weakened state. However, Divine Resurrection could bring players back from the dead to full fighting strength! Of course, the skill also had its own limits, such as a three-day cooldown for example. Even the fastest variations still needed a full day to come off cooldown.

At this point in the timeline, Black Heaven hadn't joined Sapphire Shrine yet. He should still be in the Dark Hero guild. If Nie Yan could pull Black Heaven over to his side, it would be largely beneficial to Asskickers United. However, with the emergence of the Chapter of Harmony, both sides were destined to stand at opposite ends.

Nie Yan couldn't help but let out a dejected sigh. Ahh, an Archbishop... what a pity!

Out of the Seven Archbishops, one of them, Leader Young Seven, was already in Nie Yan's camp, and Black Heaven might still join Sapphire Shrine later on. As for the five others, he heard that Guo Huai had been in talks with one, but he didn't know if they came to an agreement or not.

In the previous timeline, one of the Seven Archbishops had joined Sapphire Shrine, another was in Bloodthirst Blades, and three more were in the gaming organization, Azure Falling Sky. The remaining two were solo players. Even Victorious Return and Holy Empire didn't have a single Archbishop. It was regrettable, but naturally, they had plenty of Bishops.

If Asskickers United had one Archbishop in the future, then they would hold a significant advantage over others. But what if they had two...? Well, one could only imagine.

In any case, if Nie Yan could afford not to offend Black Heaven or Black Hell, then he would try as much as possible to do so. If he could take out something to trade—or purchase the Chapter of Harmony—then that would be the best outcome.

Nie Yan sent Black Hell a message.

The receiver has blocked all incoming messages outside of team or party chat.

During specific moments when a player didn't want to be interrupted or to avoid harassment, they might close off their chat or create a blacklist, so they wouldn't receive messages from others.

Black Hell had closed off his chat. It seemed Nie Yan's plan of

negotiating with the opposition had gone up in smoke.

If they ended up meeting in battle, then there was nothing he could do about it.

Link was one of the most prosperous towns around Calore. The area near the transport point was particularly thriving. Thanks to there being quite a few high-level maps in the vicinity of the town, many professional players opened up shops there.

The land wasn't expensive as it was in Calore. A player only needed to spend 10 silver to purchase a small plot. Opening a shop didn't cost much money either. It was entirely possible for a few people to scrounge up some money and open one together. A good deal of players set up their shops in Link, so the town's commerce prospered in an unprecedented manner.

The streets flowed with a steady stream of players. As two Priests—Black Heaven and Black Hell—strolled around the town, they were frequently approached by other players looking to form a party, but they would always bluntly refuse.

Black Heaven was a Holy Priest with the somewhat immature appearance of youth just reaching adulthood. He wore a pure white robe with a golden falcon stitched to the side of his collar. This was the symbol of the Temple of Light. It signified that he had learned Templar Magic for his class. A Priest of this sort was greatly sought after by the large guilds.

As for Black Hell, he was a twenty-six to twenty-seven-year-old man. He wore an ash-grey robe with the symbol of a viper embroidered to his cuffs using dark golden silk, clearly indicating his status as a Shadow Priest!

Shadow Priests were the least played class in the Viridian Empire. They were proficient in curses and crowd control magic on top of being able to heal. However, a Shadow Priest's healing ability was noticeably lacklustre in comparison to their purely support-focused counterpart. Their damage output was decent but was no match for that of a Mage. A skilled Shadow Priest could still be a very frightening thing. It was just that the learning curve was too high. On top of contributing curses, crowd control, and healing, they were also responsible for dealing damage. A player needed to have over several dozen skills in their skill bar, and the ability to use them smoothly and skillfully, or else they would find it very hard to contend against other classes. This difficult, rarely-picked class was the class of choice for Black Hell.

“Big Brother, who do you think that Nirvana Flame is? He was actually able to get a hold of three chapters from the Book of Order...” Black Heaven asked. While the two of them were training in the Murky Quagmire, they had accidentally stumbled into the centermost region. They were unable to use Return Scrolls there. Only after narrowly escaping death numerous times in a row were they able to retrieve the Chapter of Harmony. He had been instantly killed and sent back, while Black Hell was luckily able to get away because he had happened to obtain a Potion of Nothingness previously from running a dungeon on Specialist.

Yet that Nirvana Flame was surprisingly in possession of three chapters!

After obtaining the Chapter of Harmony, Black Hell suddenly found that three chapters from the Book of Order were actually held by a Thief called Nirvana Flame! He had to admit that the prospect possessed an irresistible attraction. If he could kill Nirvana Flame, he would be able to get another three chapters at once!

“From what I could dig up, he seems to be part of Asskickers United. He’s pretty famous as well. He definitely also knows our location.” Black Hell frowned. Although he could be considered a veteran in Dark Hero, the guild had already declined considerably. Even when organizing a team for dungeon runs, he was forced to recruit players from outside the guild. How could such a guild contend against the newly emerged powerhouse, Asskickers United? Whether they could even protect their own chapter was another problem to consider. In a one versus one, he feared absolutely no one. However, if Asskickers United sent a squadron of Thieves to surround and snatch the Chapter of Harmony from him, there was nothing he could really do to resist.

“So he’s one of the bosses of that guild? That’s going to be a little troublesome...” Black Heaven said worriedly. If Nirvana Flame sent a group of Thieves to watch them every day, they would definitely collapse under the pressure. Against the might of a guild, they were undoubtedly vulnerable. “I hear they have a feud with Victorious Return?”

“What about it? Are you suggesting we seek asylum from Victorious Return?” Black Hell raised his eyebrow. Although he had received invitations from multiple guilds, he had never once entertained the thought of leaving Dark Hero.

Seeing Black Hell's sharp eyes gaze over at him, Black Heaven hurriedly lowered his head.

"We absolutely cannot let anyone know that we have the Chapter of Harmony. Our only option is to find and kill him, then take away the three chapters from his corpse. That way he'll have no way of locating us anymore. If worst comes to worst, we'll pool together 2 gold and use it to run away to another city; then we'll figure out what to do from there," Black Hell said. If they could intercept Nirvana Flame in the wilderness, he had absolute confidence in taking him down in a one versus one situation.

"But he's in the Light Monastery," Black Heaven said. That was a Level 30 area. Only large expedition groups would go to such a place.

"We'll just have to wait until after he comes out," Black Hell replied. They could only patiently wait for an opportunity. Before then, they couldn't stay in the same spot for too long. Otherwise, they'd be surrounded by Asskickers United players.

Chapter 187 – Paladin Kavana

Nie Yan really didn't want to form an irreconcilable enmity with Black Hell. He wanted to talk with the other player first, to avoid the use of force if possible. Regardless of how the talks went, however, he would definitely try to get the Chapter of Harmony by fair means or foul. After being merged into a single item, the six chapters in Volume I would be on par with a piece of Legendary-grade equipment. The importance of such an item to his future plans was absolutely critical. Better yet, the completed Volume I was bindable and would no longer drop if he died.

I'll wait and see, I guess. It's not like Black Hell can hide when I get hourly reports on his location. Nie Yan continued to pick off the Corrupted Silver Paladins. One by one, they died until the area around the first dark gold chest was completely clear of all monsters.

After killing so many Corrupted Silver Paladins from afar, Nie Yan recognized the need for a good ranged weapon. He still had his eye on the Sub Legendary Dullahan Cavalry Crossbow. Although it had a massive Strength requirement, he could meet it with the use of equipment and skills that boosted his Strength by the time he was around Level 70. Even if he could only equip it by the time he reached Level 80, it wouldn't be too late. He absolutely had to craft this crossbow!

Nie Yan broke off his reverie, looking at the Level 30 dark gold chest in front of him. Its level would have been a bit too high for him, were it not for Lockpicking Specialist's +1 level boost to unlocking chests.

System: Opening treasure chest... Estimated Completion: 3%
... 7%... 5%... 9%...

It took over three minutes of unstable progress for Nie Yan to finally succeed in unlocking the chest.

System: You've unlocked a Dark Gold Chest! Lockpicking Specialist has gained 5 points of proficiency!

Five points of proficiency in Lockpicking Specialist? So many! Pleasantly surprised, Nie Yan opened the chest and took out a thick book and a piece of leather armour. He quickly appraised them to view their properties.

The book was jet-black with a bronze gilt around the edges. Ornate designs decorated the cover, along with some large text written in Ancient Common.

Skill Book: Hellfire (Hell Magic)

Description: Allows the user to manipulate fire from the depths of Hell to attack the opponent.

Requirements: 2 Sets of Gestures, 2 Sets of Syllables, Intermediate Arcane Sigil (Must be Inscribed)

150 Intelligence, 5 Focus, 5 Willpower (Forcefully casting this spell without meeting the necessary stat requirements will

result in the player being put in a weakened state, reducing all stats by 80% for 2 days.)

Properties: An area-of-effect spell with a cast range of 3030 meters. Increase Burn Damage. Residual Burn (Scales with Focus and Willpower above 5).

Cooldown: 2 Days.

Restrictions: Arcane Mage, Elementalist.

Hell Magic was just like Elemental Hall Magic, a higher class of spells. Anything conjured from one of these categories had far higher attack power than a common spell.

The great potency of these spells corresponded to their great usage requirements and cooldowns. Casting Hellfire required a significant amount of preparation. The player would have to find a seller and purchase an Intermediate Arcane Sigil. They'd need to spend an hour and two thousand mana inscribing Hellfire into the sigil. Furthermore, they'd often have to drink a potion to make sure they didn't run out of mana midway. Finally, two sets of syllables and gestures had to be performed before the spell could be cast. After which it would go on cooldown for two days, and the process would have to be repeated once more.

All of these prerequisites were naturally rewarded with an alarmingly powerful spell. An area-of-effect spell with a range over three kilometers was incredible. Aside from the massive damage, the spell even had a residual burn effect that scaled with the caster's Focus and Willpower.

For a high-level Mage, Focus and Willpower were extremely important stats. They would allow the player to regenerate mana faster, summon more magical energy during a set casting time, and naturally deal more damage. For example, if a Mage put ten points each in Focus and Willpower, they could deal a hundred more damage than a Mage who put zero. So even though a Mage would focus primarily on raising their Intelligence, they still needed to pay attention to their Focus and Willpower, especially when picking equipment.

As Nie Yan looked at the Hellfire skill book in his hands, joy lit up his face. Asskickers United finally had a spell from the high-ranking magics! To any guild, the significance of having such a spell was extremely high.

But who should he give the skill book to? Nie Yan first thought of Tang Yao, but with Tang Yao's lazy personality he would most likely not want to deal with such a complicated spell. Just to make sure, Nie Yan messaged Tang Yao with Hellfire's properties and asked, 「Do you want to learn this spell?」

「What a powerful spell! This Hellfire spell of yours is so much stronger than my Meteor!」Tang Yao exclaimed.「But... I'd need to spend an hour every few days to inscribe the sigil... I don't want it. Also, I recently learned Firestorm, so you should find someone else in the guild to learn Hellfire. Ugh... spending an hour inscribing the spell means that I'm not levelling up during that time. I'm actually better off with just Meteor and Firestorm.」

「Alright then. Since you have Firestorm, I'll be giving Hellfire to someone else in the guild.」When handing out a benefit like the

Hellfire skill book, Nie Yan would obviously prioritize the members of the guild who had signed a contract over those who didn't. Of those, there were several Arcane Mages and Elementalists. The most skilled player from this group would receive Hellfire.

Although Tang Yao had the highest level, his experience was mainly from grinding and Nie Yan's advice. In terms of technical skill, the Arcane Mages and Elementalists who had signed the guild contract were probably better than him. He decided to delegate the task of choosing an owner for the skill book to Guo Huai.

Nie Yan put away the skill book and looked at the other piece of loot he had received.

Skywalker Leather Armour (Dark Gold)

Requirements: Level 30

Set Items: Skywalker Leather armour, Skywalker Bracers, Skywalker Boots

Properties: Defense 102-108, Dexterity +19, Defense Level +1, Damage Reduction (Rank 3), Defense Against Magic Attacks +20%.

Weight: 7lb

Restrictions: Thief; can be equipped by any faction.

Nie Yan looked at this Dark Gold Skywalker Leather armour. The Skywalker Set was the best set of armour for level 30 thieves. In his past life, someone had relied on this very equipment set to kill a

Mage who had a five-level advantage over them thanks to the boost in survivability.

After all, as a set of Dark Gold equipment, the properties were bound to be good.

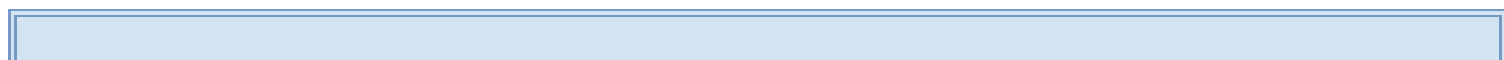
Even though the Skywalker Leather armour wasn't particularly suited for his fighting style, its boost to his survivability was unquestionable. If he could really get himself the complete Level 30 Skywalker Set, he could prioritize on improving his own damage without worry later on, perhaps by socketing the set with Strength Gems and so on.

Since he had found one piece of the Skywalker Set here, the other two pieces of the set were bound to be here as well, considering this entire section of the map was explored by no one else but him.

I can't wear this for now... Nie Yan put away the Skywalker Leather Armour in his bag. He proceeded to hunt the rest of the Corrupted Silver Paladins in the map, drawing them out one by one.

With everything in order, Nie Yan cleared out the crowd of Corrupted Silver Paladins surrounding the other dark chest. After which he walked over and opened it.

Just like Nie Yan predicted earlier, he found the two remaining pieces of the Skywalker Set in the other chest.



Skywalker Bracers: (Dark Gold)

Requirements: Level 30

Set Items: Skywalker Leather Armour, Skywalker Bracers, Skywalker Boots

Properties: Defense 82–88, Dexterity +12, Strength +15, Damage Reduction (Rank 3), Defense Against Magic Attacks +20%.

Weight: 1 lb

Restrictions: Thief; can be equipped by any faction.

Skywalker Boots: (Dark Gold)

Requirements: Level 30

Set Items: Skywalker Leather Armour, Skywalker Bracers, Skywalker Boots

Properties: Defense 72–85, Dexterity +10, Balance +5, Swift Run (Rank 3), Defense Against Magic Attacks +20%.

Weight: 3 lb

Restrictions: Thief; can be equipped by any faction.

Nie Yan needed to equip all three pieces to see the true effects of the set. He wasn't knowledgeable of what the set effects of the Skywalker Set were. In the previous timeline, he was still wearing a mix of Silver and Gold equipment at Level 30, while his hope of ever obtaining a set of Dark Gold equipment such as the Skywalker Set was merely a fleeting fantasy. Let alone dark gold chests, back then, he hadn't opened more than a few gold chests. At that time, he had never been the first to explore any map, nor did he have the

ability to search for traces of dark gold chests.

In this life, however, his circumstances were completely different.

Finding the two dark gold chests made Nie Yan very happy. A Hellfire skill book and the full Skywalker Set, not a bad haul! In addition, he also had twenty-six fragments of Splitting Edge in his bag. When he returned to the city, he could find an Intermediate Blacksmith to forge the complete weapon. As for the leftover fragments, he could throw them in the guild treasury. There were definitely going to be others who would want them in the future.

Nie Yan scanned the central hall. The floor was littered with corpses.

The crystal coffin up ahead was the only thing left to attend to.

Although his goal was extraordinarily close, Nie Yan was still on high alert. He couldn't discount the possibility of a boss emerging in this area.

Nie Yan ascended the flight of stairs. The crystal coffin was right before his eyes, reaching up to his waist as he stood beside it. Sculpted from pure and transparent crystal of the highest quality, sparkling and limpid, it reflected a splendid radiance under the lights of the central hall.

A silver-armoured NPC lay unmoving inside the crystal coffin.

Through the transparent crystal, his features could be clearly seen—fair complexion, blonde hair, and a handsome face befitting a hero. His entire body emitted a faint, gentle glow. He appeared divine—dignified, with both arms crossed around his chest. A Paladin's sword rested right beside his coffin.

Both his eyes were closed. His serene appearance made it seem like he was still alive, as though he could awaken at a moment's notice.

He was probably the Paladin who had died, Kavana.

According to the history of the Atlanta continent, he was a figure from the end of the Dark Era. In other words, his corpse had been resting here for almost a millennium. Yet there weren't any signs of rotting.

Nie Yan looked over at Kavana's legs. A thin piece of paper floated just above his body, emitting a bright resplendence that dazzled the eyes.

This was the item that Nie Yan had been searching for, the Chapter of Justice!

Chapter 188 – Chapter Of Justice

At this moment, two crisp system sounds rang out.

You have discovered Kavana's crystal coffin.

Quest Progress: Search for clues. Find out the cause of Kavana's death.

Nie Yan examined the crystal coffin. It was tightly sealed. He was unsure of how he should proceed. If he tried opening the coffin by force, it'd surely trigger a chain of dangerous events. He absolutely wanted to avoid such a risk.

The Chapter of Justice hovered in right front of Nie Yan. It was but an arm's length away, but he was helpless to retrieve it.

He considered the two system notifications. Find out the cause of death? What? Am I supposed to cut open the body and perform an autopsy...? It doesn't matter. He shook his head. I'll get the chapter now, then I'll try to complete the quest if I can. If I can't, then so be it.

Let's see... There should be a special mechanism to open this thing. Nie Yan searched around for a bit, uncovering some inscriptions on the side of the coffin.

Nie Yan examined them. This was some sort of prayer!

Dear Sir Kavana, you have the tolerance and kindness of a saint. I hope you rest in peace... As I face the sea breeze of the Silent Gulf, I often think of you. If I had a choice, I wish I could've been born as an ordinary human girl instead. That way I wouldn't have to stay here all by myself. I'd be able to die peacefully by your side. I'd no longer have to abide by my promise to you of staying in exile for several millennia... I ask that you forgive the sins of my clan. I hope that my people can receive redemption.

-Dragon Girl Venita

Nie Yan's mind trembled as he read through the text. It mentioned a specific location, Silent Gulf!

If he wanted to uncover the truth behind Kavana's death, that was the best place for him to look.

Nie Yan recalled a legend of the Silent Gulf he'd heard in his past life. It told of a mysterious girl, possessing an otherworldly beauty, who appeared once every ten days on an isle. She would stand near the reefs just before dawn, silently gazing at the horizon until the morning sun arose, whereupon she would quietly depart.

Many players had attempted to acquire a quest from her, but they would always return with nothing to show for their efforts.

After a while, most players gave up, and the girl's background

became an unsolvable mystery.

She had come to be known as Watcher Venita.

Logically speaking, even a dragon would gradually grow old after a thousand years. Yet according to the rumours from his past life, Venita still appeared as young and beautiful as ever.

Venita regularly appeared on the isle, even up until the time Nie Yan stopped playing. It seemed no one had completed the quest related to Kavana in his past life.

Well, considering it's a Legendary quest line, I guess there's a lot of connecting quests. I'll probably have to unravel many mysteries to progress... Huh? Nie Yan was struck with inspiration as he read Venita's appeal near the end of the text. In keeping with the highest etiquette among Paladins, he expressed his profound respect to Kavana's corpse by placing his right hand over his chest.

Once Nie Yan completed the gesture, the top of the crystal coffin gradually melted away, and the Chapter of Justice gently floated up.

Success!

Pleasantly surprised, Nie Yan reached out to grab the Chapter of Justice. Its brilliant glow faded upon making contact with his hand.

At the same moment, Kavana's corpse dissolved into countless specks of light which gently floated up toward the ceiling before finally fading away. Nie Yan could see Kavana's spirit within the specks. He was shrouded in a divine radiance. A pair of angelic wings sprouted from his back as he disappeared into the light.

After everything was over, a silver-white object fell into the coffin.

It was the Medal of the Ten Holy Paladins!

Nie Yan stored the medal away in his bag. He didn't bother examining the properties of the two items he had just obtained. Instead, he eyed the scroll clutched tightly in his hand.

"If at all possible, I really hope I won't have to waste this Unknown Transfer Scroll..." Nie Yan muttered.

The central hall violently shook the moment he aired his thoughts.

"Dammit! Time to run!"

Without hesitation, Nie Yan sprinted toward the exit. He crushed a Haste Scroll and activated Shadow Dance, giving himself a sudden burst of speed. His figure flitted across the red-carpeted floor, leaving behind after-images, as he covered over thirty meters in a short period of time.

A moment later, a black transfer gate materialized beside the coffin, and a figure shrouded in darkness stepped out of the gate. It was an NPC in black armour. He was incomparably ugly. His skin was pale as ash, and inky tentacles sprouted from his skull. He was like an ancient fiend who had awakened from antiquity.

“Wretched fool, you dared to release the soul of Kavana!?” The black-armoured NPC’s voice seemed to come from the region of the damned, sinister and terrifying.

With a wave of his hand, a black aura fell over him, and he gained an explosive increase in speed. He sprung towards Nie Yan, like an arrow released from the bowstring.

The distance between both sides rapidly shrunk.

Nie Yan felt a piercing chill behind him. It seemed like a sinister, frightful aura of death was about to devour all of his strength.

Deterrence!

Nie Yan didn’t know if the skill would have any effect. In any case, it was worth a try.

The NPC only paused for a split-second. His speed didn’t decrease at all. He slashed down with his greatsword, sending a ghastly swordlight flying toward Nie Yan’s back.

Nie Yan shot out a web line from his Silk Spinner Ring which

stuck to a nearby pillar. With a jerk of his hand, his body flung into the air, narrowly avoiding the NPC's attack. He immediately activated the Crawler Ring's ability and clung on to the pillar. He quickly skittered toward the ceiling like a spider, looking to escape outside.

The NPC arrived at the base of the pillar shortly after. Only then did Nie Yan get a chance to inspect the son of a bitch that was pursuing him this whole time.

Fallen Paladin Brewin (Elite): Level ?

Health: ?

It was Brewin of the Ten Holy Paladins! However, right now, he looked no different from a monster.

It seems the storyline for this quest is a lot more complicated than I thought...

As a Fallen Paladin, Brewin didn't have many long-range skills, so he had no way of getting to Nie Yan. He gave a mighty swing of his greatsword.「Boom!」The pillar instantly collapsed.

Nie Yan could see web-like cracks spreading where the pillar connected to the ceiling. Chunks of rock began raining down.

Nie Yan felt something suddenly come loose. The section of the

pillar he was on had collapsed. It looked like he was going to be crushed among the the falling rocks in the next moment. He leaped to the side, rolling to break his fall, and narrowly avoided being buried under a pile of rubble. He rushed out of the central hall.

Brewin caught up, then slashed down with his greatsword, sending a gigantic crescent wave of black energy flying toward him.

Nie Yan activated the Unknown Transfer Scroll.

In the next moment, he was engulfed by the surging wave of black energy.

However, as the attack sought to obliterate him, his figure completely vanished.

After activating the Unknown Transfer Scroll, Nie Yan didn't know where he had been teleported to. He just knew there were several dozen Black Bears in the vicinity. He hastily activated Disappear, then began making his way out. When he found a relatively safe region, he took out a Return Scroll.

A bright radiance enveloped him twenty seconds later, and he was teleported back to Calore. As he recalled his brush with death just moments ago, a bead of cold sweat dripped down from his forehead. However, something worth rejoicing over was that he had obtained the Chapter of Justice. In addition, he had also gotten Kavana's medal.

Nie Yan glanced at the nearby players walking around. Finally, he felt like he had returned to civilization.

Since he still hadn't cleared his red name, all the players that had noticed him looked on with amazed expressions.

Nie Yan ignored these gazes as he made his way to his personal storage. While he walked, he examined the properties of the two items he had recently obtained.

Medal of the Ten Holy Paladins (Special Item)

Properties: Strength +20

Holy Descent: Grants 3 seconds of immunity to all magic. Movement Speed +20%. Increases the effects of all Holy Magic by 20%.

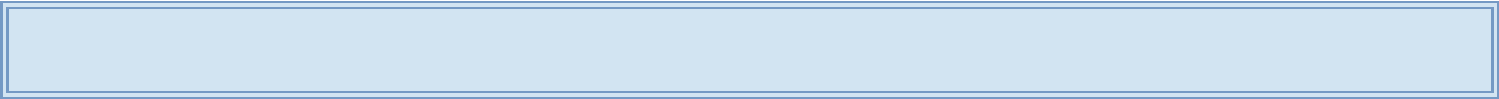
Cooldown: 2 days.

Restrictions: Righteous Guardian of Order

Nie Yan had believed that the Medal of the Ten Holy Paladins was only a quest item. He didn't expect it to be an equipable accessory. It was a piece of Paladin equipment that bolstered the effects of all holy magic. However, anyone could equip it as long as they belonged to the Righteous Faction. Even though he didn't have any holy magic, the other effects were pretty useful for PvP. Three seconds of immunity to magic would allow him to ignore all crowd control effects. When up against Mages, especially those who had many skills that could lock a player down, the first attack had to be a guaranteed kill. While not long, three seconds was more than

enough for him to get close to his target. At his current movement speed, he could close a gap of nine meters in around three seconds, and that was excluding the effects of any speed buffs. Unless the opponent also had an escape skill of their own, they would surely die while he was immune to all magic.

Nie Yan shifted his focus to the Chapter of Justice.



-Chapter of Justice

Description: The first chapter of Volume I of the Book of Order. A fragment of a Legendary item. Whoever shall possess this chapter will receive the inheritance of the God of Light. Your mission is to spread the glory of light!

Properties: Receive 2 stat points and 1 skill point every 5 levels. Focus +15, Willpower +15, Resilience +16, Jump +15, Reflex +15, Movement Speed +16.

Arrival of the Saint: Grants immunity to all debuffs. Increases the effects of all Holy Magic by 200%, and gain 30 Willpower for five minutes.

Cooldown: 10 days (1/10)

Holy Ray Shining: Transforms Holy Ray into a group-target skill, empowering damage by threefold, and increasing cast range to 3030 meters. Purifies all evil creatures.

Cooldown: 2 days (1/2)

Restrictions: Can only be bound by a member of the Righteous Guardian of Order.

Note: Item effects are applied immediately upon entering the player's bag.

Chapter 189 – Elite

After doing what he needed in his personal storage, Nie Yan set out to the Asskickers United guild headquarters. Guo Huai, Zhao Li, and Hao Cheng were still busy with guild business. In fact, ever since the guild was established, they had never found any free time to level. The benefit to that, however, was that they had become quite skillful in handling administrative affairs. Although the guild still required individuals who were especially talented in administration, they wouldn't feel at ease handing over that responsibility to others.

Aside from that, Guo Huai had also recruited a few people from his family's firm. He put them in charge of combing through the backgrounds of every guild member. They had managed to weed out countless moles that were sent by Victorious Return and other guilds.

Nie Yan looked over the list of players who had signed a contract with the guild. There were over a hundred individuals in total, each a peak talent in some respect. It could even be said to be a galaxy of talent. Eleven of them had the potential to receive a Shadow Dancer, Magister, Archbishop, or similarly ranked title later on. They consisted of Sun, Leader Young Seven, Taotie, Undying Scoundrel, Blue Yarn Thread, Blowhard Summer Bug, and so on.

Altogether there was one Archbishop, two Shadow Dancers, two Guardians, two Heroes, two Magisters, one Divine Sage, and one Templar. Even right now, they displayed immense talent. Each one of them received generous treatment from Asskickers United. They had access to the best resources in the guild. The Starry

Night Potion Shop would supply them with plenty of potions, pills, and other consumables every day. Nie Yan himself had invested over 100 gold into them. They could form teams and find excellent teammates whenever they wanted. As a result, they were growing at a rapid pace.

These players had secured more resources because they entered the game relatively early. The fact that they were talented and hardworking—along with a myriad of other factors working in tandem—allowed them to reach the pinnacle in the previous timeline. And in the present timeline, Nie Yan had bettered their conditions in every aspect.

All in all, given the proper environment, a genius would always rise to the top.

Taotie, Undying Scoundrel, Blue Yarn Thread, and Summer Bug were chatting near the entrance of the guild headquarters. As they were prepared to set out and level, they saw Nie Yan walking over. They all greeted him courteously.

“Hello, Boss Nirvana Flame!” Taotie called out. He was a twenty-odd-year-old man in shiny bright Paladin armour. He had a full set of Gold-grade equipment on, several pieces he had obtained by himself while the rest had been provided by the guild. At the current stage of the game, he was only a slight bit lacking in comparison to the top-elites of Withered Leaf.

“Hello boss!” Undying Scoundrel greeted Nie Yan. As an Elementalist, the Elemental Resonance Set he wore was already the best Level 20 set a player of his class could get.

They were all peak players of Calore in Nie Yan's past life, Yet they were all gathered here right now.

Nie Yan nodded, acknowledging them with a faint smile. He hung around for a while to chat which made them feel slightly honoured. From the moment they joined the guild, they could tell that the astonishing resources of Asskickers United was in no way inferior to those of behemoths like Victorious Return. Nie Yan and Tang Yao's identities were shrouded in a dense fog of mystery that no one could see through. Nie Yan rarely showed himself in public. While with Tang Yao, almost none of the guild members had ever seen his face aside from in the videos Guo Huai had uploaded. As a result, they had come to revere these two figures in their minds. They didn't expect Nie Yan to be so approachable. It was quite a surprise.

"You guys are now the elite members of Asskickers United. The guild has provided you with the best environment and resources it has to offer. So I hope you guys can show the guild your worth in the future. Accomplish great things, and the guild will never mistreat you," Nie Yan said. He had already spent quite a bit on them. As long as one or two of them reached the same heights as they did in the previous timeline, it would be worth the investment.

"Boss Nirvana Flame, you can put your faith in us!" Taotie, Undying Scoundrel, and the rest said in unison.

Afterwards, Nie Yan met up with Guo Huai.

“Here, give this to the person you think is the most suitable out of that lot.” Nie Yan handed the Hellfire skill book over to Guo Huai.

The appearance of the skill book instantly attracted the attention of everyone around them.

It was high-level magic!

Even among the large guilds, high-level magic was extremely scarce and highly sought after. Needless to say, the skill books for them didn't appear very often. Even if you took out five or six full sets of Gold-grade equipment to trade for the skill book of a high-level magic, the other side might not necessary be willing. It was reported that Victorious Return had mobilized over seven hundred core members to deal with a Lord-class boss for the sake of such a skill book, suffering several hundred casualties before finally obtaining it.

No one in Asskickers United had learned high-level magic. Many guild members felt this matter to be quite a pity.

But the appearance of the Hellfire skill book signified that Asskickers United also had the ability to obtain a high-level magic.

“There are several Arcane Mages and Elementalists who've been performing pretty well. Let me think...” Guo Huai said in a slightly distressed tone. Finding a reliable person to learn Hellfire was extremely important. It would be wasted in the hands of an unskilled player.

Nie Yan felt reassured about these members who had signed contracts with the guild. All of them would learn high-level magic at some point in the future. It was only a matter of now or later.

“I’ll let you handle it,” Nie Yan said. He deposited the sixteen pieces of equipment as well as the six extra fragments of Splitting Edge that he had obtained from the Light Monastery into the guild treasury. “By the way, how goes the search for top-quality Magic Redwood Logs and Fire Source Crystals?”

“I’ve already found a seller, they’re from another guild, but the price is somewhat high. We’re still in the middle of negotiations. If you find it suitable, we can immediately purchase them,” Guo Huai answered. He couldn’t help but wonder what in the world was Nie Yan going to do with these materials.

“How much are they asking for?” Nie Yan asked. Top-quality Magic Redwood Logs and Fire Source Crystals were high-level crafting materials. They were fairly uncommon in the today’s marketplace, and most guilds generally wouldn’t be willing to sell them.

“They’re asking 30 gold for 3 Fire Source Crystals and 10 top-quality Magic Redwood Logs,” Guo Huai replied. It was a huge sum of money from his point of view.

“Accept the offer. Send the materials to my personal storage. You can withdraw the money from the Starry Night Potion Shop,” Nie Yan said nonchalantly. Before he had reached Level 60 in his past

life, if something had a price of 30 gold, he wouldn't dare to even consider it. However, his circumstances in this life had completely changed. Besides, he had gotten used to the feeling of being rich and imposing.

It was only 30 gold, nothing more!!

A successfully crafted Sub Legendary crossbow would be worth 200 gold at the very least!

At the later stages of the game—particularly when siege battles were in full effect—every large guild would profit immensely from the taxes they reaped in their respective territories. By then, with so much surplus capital, an ordinary Sub Legendary item selling for 500–600 gold wasn't an uncommon sight.

Sub Legendary gear was godly in the eyes of all players!

Although he temporarily couldn't equip the Dullahan Cavalry Crossbow, he'd be content with just sneaking a few peeks at it inside his bag every now and then.

“Alright, I'll make the purchase right now.” Guo Huai nodded, no longer hesitating. Since Nie Yan didn't balk at spending 30 gold to purchase these materials, he was certain they were important.

The crafting of the Sub Legendary crossbow wasn't guaranteed to succeed. There was a chance of failure. However, since he already had the necessary materials on hand, he might as well give it a

shot. As for who to pick for crafting the crossbow, Advanced Blacksmith Kade was the best choice, but it would probably be expensive.

When requesting an NPC to craft a weapon, all you needed to do was provide the weapon's blueprint, necessary materials, and pay a fee. If the crafting failed, then the onus was on you, and the blueprint would be returned regardless of the outcome.

As long as Nie Yan still had the blueprint, there was no harm in trying. He had enough materials to make two attempts anyway.

After finishing his business, Nie Yan left the guild headquarters. Aside from the Dullahan Cavalry Crossbow, he also needed to forge the Splitting Edge.

In the previous timeline, the highest average market price for the Splitting Edge was more than 30 gold. Many players were already Level 60–70 around the time Nie Yan started playing the game. So the marketplace was filled with Splitting Edge fragments, selling for about 10 silver each. If you ran a dungeon, then you could get them for significantly cheaper. Even then, collecting twenty fragments would still cost around 3 gold altogether.

However, at present, Conviction had only been open for a few weeks at most. Even an offer of 100 gold couldn't garner a Splitting Edge. Level 30 dungeons still weren't released yet, and very few teams dared to explore Level 30 maps. So how could there possibly be any to sell?

Nie Yan's current set of gear consisted of various pieces of equipment he picked up along his journey. If he wanted to get a full set of powerful equipment, he'd have to expend quite a bit of effort. Gearing himself up from head to toe with godly equipment would be very difficult. The various big shots from the guilds of his past life had poured in a lot of blood, sweat, and tears trying to accomplish such. His current achievements could already be regarded as extraordinary. According to the progression of the game in his past life, at around Level 20–30, players shouldn't even dream about seeing the shadow of piece of Sub Legendary equipment. At best, some lucky ones would be able to find a few fragments. However, out of the thousands upon thousands of fragments, just how many would be fused into a complete piece of equipment? Now that was hard to say. It wasn't until Level 100 that the leaders of the major guilds were able to wear so-called godly, Sub Legendary equipment. As for Nie Yan, he at least had definite goals: the first was completing Volume I of the Book of Order, the second was crafting the Dullahan Cavalry Crossbow, and the third was gathering the remaining two fragments of Sulgata's Shadow.

“Nirvana Flame added another dozen or so pieces of Level 30 equipment to the treasury. Seems like it's mostly stuff for Paladins this time.”

“Hey, guys... where do you think the bosses go off to train?” Blue Yarn Thread, Summer Bug, and the others discussed.

“Beats me. But you know, there's one thing I'm certain of... a Level 30 Gold-grade set I can equip has finally appeared! I'm warning you guys... I want that Soul Judgement Set, so nobody fight me for it!” Taotie shouted in high spirits. He examined the

new Gold-grade equipment in the treasury. Each piece cost almost 3000 merit points. However, to an elite player like him, such an amount wasn't hard to obtain. He could receive 1000 merit points for every piece of Level 20 Gold-grade equipment and 200 merit points for every piece of Silver-grade equipment donated to the treasury. All he needed to do was contribute a bit more to the guild.

“I have a Hellfire skill book with me right here.” Guo Huai approached the group. He shared the information of the skill book with everyone in the chat.

“Boss Watchful Snail, give it to me! I'll spend 20,000 merit points!” Undying Scoundrel exclaimed in excitement.

Undying Scoundrel had performed pretty well recently. He was also one of the most skilled Mages in the guild. He was quite suited to learn Hellfire. Guo Huai turned to Summer Bug. As a top Arcane Mage in the guild, he was qualified to compete with Undying Scoundrel for the skill book.

Summer Bug shook his head. “Give it to Undying Scoundrel. I have two small-scale spells already. I don't need a high-level magic for the time being. Besides, I usually level together with him, so it doesn't really matter which one of us learns the spell.”

“Alright, it's settled. The skill book goes to Undying Scoundrel.” Guo Huai nodded.

“Thank you, boss!” Undying Scoundrel giddily took the Hellfire

skill book from Guo Huai's hands.

Chapter 190 – Charge Weapon

「How's the team doing now?」Nie Yan asked Resplendent Bladelight. Aside from providing some important advice every now and then, he didn't really concern himself with the matters of the elite team because he had full faith in them.

「Everyone's doing fine,」Bladelight responded.「We've recently cleared the Level 20 Shadow Marsh dungeon on Normal difficulty.」With Nie Yan's guidance, their progress had vastly outstripped that of the major guilds'. They were all curious. Just where did Nie Yan get all his news? Maybe he had an inside source?

「Is everyone working together well? How's the team synergy?」

「Young Seven is the best right now, but Yi Yan is also very strong. Everyone else on the team can also be considered an elite player of the game. Asskickers United really has a lot of experts!」Resplendent Bladelight couldn't imagine how Nie Yan had gathered all these skilled players into one guild. Back when he was in Unhindered, him and Hei Zhuo (Black Amazing) were the only powerhouses in the guild. Everyone else was only so-so. However, after joining Asskickers United's elite team, he found himself with teammates that were his equals. Dungeoning with experts was definitely much more enjoyable!

While the other major guilds were still trying to clear Shadow Marsh for the first time, Asskickers United's elite team had already cleared it on Normal and were starting on Hard. The equipment they swapped out or didn't need was all placed into the guild

treasury to strengthen the auxiliary teams. These dozen or so auxiliary teams were already trying to clear Shadow Marsh for their first times.

「Another three thousand players from Unhindered have followed me into Asskickers United now. However, there's no way to tell if any are spies sent over by Hei Zhuo. After all, these people are all latecomers who have worked under Hei Zhuo for a while now. It's unlikely that none of them came with malicious intentions. Aside from them, the vast majority of these brothers will gradually become loyal members of Asskickers United.」

「Don't worry about it. I'll just have Little Worm, Watchful Snail, and the others keep watch over the new recruits. Even if there are some spies, they couldn't make much of a storm anyways.」Nie Yan laughed off the idea. It's not like they could get the entire guild to revolt or anything. With just the people who came over from Unhindered, they wouldn't even be able to make a wave, much less a storm.

There were many players trying to join Asskickers United every single day. Even Nie Yan couldn't imagine the extent to which his guild would grow in the future. In his past life, Asskickers United would already be considered a large guild. However, because of the stir Nie Yan had been making, the future might end up completely different.

「How many people are left in Unhindered now?」Nie Yan asked.

「About twenty to thirty thousand. I understand Hei Zhuo's character very well. With his abilities, even though so many people

left the guild, it still doesn't affect Unhindered too much.」 Resplendent Bladelight really was too embarrassed to talk about the issues that resulted in his falling out with Hei Zhuo.

The current Unhindered had over twenty thousand players, giving it a respectable amount of strength. However, it paled in comparison to the current Asskickers United. What's more, Asskickers United was still in its rapid development phase, so it would vastly outstrip Unhindered in the near future.

「You guys keep playing, then. If you need anything, just let Watchful Snail know.」 Nie Yan knew that with the financial clout held by Asskickers United, any reasonable request made by the elite team would be as good as fulfilled.

Edgeless has deposited Fire Source Crystals x3 and top-quality Magic Redwood Logs x10 into your personal storage.

The materials I asked Guo Huai to purchase have arrived! Nie Yan ran to his storage to retrieve the materials, then made a trip to the Starry Night Potion Shop to withdraw 50 gold, before finally heading over to the smithy of Advanced Blacksmith Kade.

As he walked through the familiar streets of Calore, he thought back to when he used to buy Bat Teeth from players and sell them to Blacksmith Kade for his first significant profits. Back then, he'd busied himself going back and forth many times just for a few silvers. Now, after less than a month, he was the secret owner of the Starry Night Potion Shop, the founder of the Union of Assassins, and the true leader of Asskickers United.

For things to change so rapidly was truly unfathomable.

Snapping himself out of his reminiscing, Nie Yan walked into the Kade Smithy. It had been upgraded to Tier 2 since his last visit, so it was much more spacious than before.

“Sir Demon Hunter, what have you come to my humble shop for?” When Kade saw Nie Yan, he immediately became respectful. The hierarchy system within Calore was extremely strict. As a mere Advanced Blacksmith, Kade was not permitted to show even the slightest disrespect to a Demon Hunter like Nie Yan. If he did, he would immediately be hauled out to trial and punished, even if he was on good terms with the offended.

“I would like to have two items forged. First, I would like to have a Splitting Edge forged from these fragments.” Because of the status that accompanied a Demon Hunter, Nie Yan had no need to appease or haggle with Kade the way an ordinary player might.

“Combining a Splitting Edge from its fragments would normally cost 50 silver. You only need to pay sixty percent of the listed price, so that would be 30 silver.” Blacksmith Kade took the twenty Splitting Edge fragments and began to forge.

A Warrior who had been standing in the Kade Smithy saw this exchange. Witnessing Advanced Blacksmith Kade treat Nie Yan with such reverence, he was shocked into a momentary daze.

Nie Yan eyed the Warrior who looked to be in his mid-twenties. He wore a pretty good set of armor. The Warrior was reserved but

still showed signs of a noteworthy bearing. Nie Yan used Transcendent Insight and saw that his name was Reborn. The name was unfamiliar to Nie Yan.

“Hello there.” Reborn walked over to greet Nie Yan.

“Hello.” Nie Yan nodded indifferently. He wasn’t really interested in making connections with players he didn’t know.

“You’re here to have something forged right? Blacksmith Kade treats you very respectfully. I have a set of materials with me that I want him to forge into a weapon. Do you think you could help me negotiate a price?” Reborn asked. In Conviction, players could get up to a ten percent discount by haggling with an NPC. The success of the negotiations depended on both the player’s ability to haggle and their Influence in the area.

Haggle? Nie Yan revealed an uncomfortable expression. He had always hated negotiating with NPCs for anything.

“My weapon would require 7 gold to forge. If you can get me a discount of at least 70 silver, I can give you half of it.” Seeing Nie Yan’s somewhat impatient look, Reborn quickly offered him a bit of profit.

Generally, a piece of equipment that would require 7 gold to forge would be considered one of the highest quality. However, to Nie Yan, this bit of money didn’t count for much.

Nie Yan replied, “If you trust me enough to give me the materials, I can immediately obtain a 40% discount.”

Reborn looked at Nie Yan doubtfully. This person shouldn’t be trying to con me out of these materials, should he?

Nie Yan didn’t want to talk more than was necessary, so he watched Kade work at his forge for a while. After working himself into a sweat, the blacksmith finally finished forging the Splitting Edge. Holding the completed weapon, Blacksmith Kade walked over to Nie Yan.

“Sir Demon Hunter, the Splitting Edge has been completed.” Kade handed the weapon over to Nie Yan. It was a sharp dagger about seven inches long, with jagged teeth lining its sharp edge. Its shape allowed it to easily penetrate an enemy’s armor and cause residual bleed damage.

Its weight felt just right in Nie Yan’s hand, giving a very familiar feeling. After all, he’d used this very dagger from around Level 30 all the way to Level 60 in his past life.

Splitting Edge (Dark Gold): Charge Weapon

Requirements: 120 Strength, 100 Dexterity, 20 Willpower

Properties: Attack 206–299, +10% chance to pierce armour, +10% chance to inflict bleed damage for 5 seconds

Explosion (Innate Skill): Once fully charged, the weapon will blast the energy out when inside an opponent’s body, dealing extra damage. Charge: 0/100.

Attack Speed: 2.9

Weight: 5lb

Restrictions: Thief; can be equipped by all factions.

This dagger was truly one of the most overpowered weapons before Level 50. Both the armour-piercing and the bleeding abilities were extremely deadly. The Explosion skill was especially helpful, and it even did a lot of damage to bosses because it ignored defense.

Charge Weapons generally had a Willpower requirement. If a player's Willpower was not high enough, forcibly using the weapon would result in a backlash. Willpower would also affect the charging speed: a higher stat value would allow the weapon to charge faster.

With Nie Yan's 37 Willpower, for example, he'd be able to charge the weapon by roughly 20 points every day.

The max energy capacity for Explosion was 100 points. The more energy that was stored up, the higher the damage of the skill. With only 20 energy, the skill would do roughly twice his attack power as damage, not to mention it would ignore all armour. It was effective against both players and monsters, regardless of how high their defense was.

Once the skill was activated, all of the energy in the weapon would be emptied at once, no matter how much was stored up.

Now that he possessed a Charge Weapon, as long as it had enough energy stored up, he would even be able to effortlessly kill some particularly tanky Warriors.

For an ordinary player, having 10 Willpower was already considered impressive. But Nie Yan far exceeded the average player by having 37 Willpower, thanks to the stat bonuses he gained from the chapters of the Book of Order. He could draw out even more might from the Splitting Edge.

Nie Yan equipped Splitting Edge to his primary weapon slot while switching [Blood Pact](#) to his secondary. His attack power shot up explosively. His total attack power wasn't calculated by simply adding the attack of his primary and secondary weapon together but rather with a special formula. Around 20% of the attack power of his secondary weapon would be added to that of his primary weapon.

Blood Pact +7 (Dark Gold)

Requirements: Level 7

Properties: Attack 93-96, Dexterity +11, Critical +12, Lifesteal 3%

Attack Speed: 2.3

Weight; 3 lbs.

Restrictions: Thief. Can be equipped by all factions.

Nie Yan checked his current attack power. It was almost 430. For a Thief player, such a value was incredibly frightening. It wouldn't even have any trouble dealing with plate-armoured Warriors.

Reborn prudently observed Nie Yan. His figure seemed familiar,

as if he had seen it somewhere before. He suddenly remembered. He had seen Nie Yan before in the video of Asskickers United battling Victorious Return. This person was considered a celebrity. He recalled once more how respectfully Blacksmith Kade had treated Nie Yan. Was there any reason for such a person to swindle him?

Reborn called out, “Brother, I’ll give these materials to you. Please help me get this sword forged.”

Chapter 191 – Heavy Crossbow!

“Aren’t you afraid I’ll try to swindle your materials?” Nie Yan asked with a raised eyebrow. He was slightly surprised. The other party was willing to hand over their precious materials to a total stranger?

“What do I have to be afraid of? That dagger in your hand should be worth more than my weapon, so why would you care about the few materials I have?” Reborn had quite the discerning eye. Nie Yan’s Splitting Edge was worth at least 30 gold. He could tell the dagger wasn’t ordinary with a simple glance. What’s more, he felt that a person of such high status would surely care about their reputation. If his materials really did end up being swindled, he could just upload the video online to the official forums, and Nie Yan would lose all standing in the game.

Nie Yan pondered for a moment. At the current stage of the game, anyone that could take out this much money to forge a weapon wouldn’t be lacking in personal resources or strength. Besides, it didn’t require much effort on his part to lend Reborn a helping hand, and he’d also be sowing some good karma for the guild.

“Alright, give me the materials,” Nie Yan said. He wondered just what kind of weapon Reborn wanted to forge for it to cost so much.

“Sure.” Reborn sent Nie Yan a trade request, then placed all the materials in the trade window.

Nie Yan's screen began filling up with all sorts of materials, around a dozen items altogether. He scanned through them, estimating their total value to be at least 10 gold.

Now that he had seen the materials, he knew exactly what Reborn wanted to forge.

"It's for the Flamecross Sword?" Nie Yan interrupted. It was regarded as one of the very best among procurable Level 30 weapons. He gazed at Reborn meaningfully. In order to obtain so many expensive materials, you either had to possess a certain amount of influence or be filthy rich.

"You know what I want to forge?" Reborn was taken aback. He hasn't even seen the blueprint, how does he know? Did someone else forge it before me...? A trace of doubt lingered in his mind as he placed the blueprint inside the trade window. "It's for a greatsword."

"It's not a bad weapon, but the Strength requirement is quite high."

"I know. 280 Strength. I have to socket some of my gear with Strength Gems, then I should be fine when I hit Level 30."

Nie Yan pressed confirm on the trade window. He walked back to Blacksmith Kade, handing over the materials and blueprint for the Flamecross Sword.

Blacksmith Kade looked over the blueprint, then began forging the weapon.

“Are you the boss of Asskickers United?” Reborn asked.

With how the situation had developed so far, Nie Yan knew that even if he wanted to stay low-key, it just wasn’t possible anymore. He nodded his head. “Yes, I am.”

“Is your guild’s elite team still looking for members?”

“No, the elite team is currently full. Guild members can only try their hand at joining one of the auxiliary teams. If their performance is good, maybe they’ll get a chance to join the elite team. Our auxiliary teams aren’t bad either though. They’ve already moved on to the Shadow Marsh dungeon,” Nie Yan answered. “Why do you ask? Are you considering joining?”

Reborn was shocked. Let alone auxiliary teams, even the elite teams from most large guilds were only starting to run Shadow Marsh. He didn’t expect the progression of Asskickers United to be so frighteningly fast! Wow, they’re already so far ahead! He had only asked the question on a whim, but now he was actually tempted to join.

“I’m going back to discuss this with some of my friends. If they’re willing, maybe we really will join your guild,” Reborn announced. He had started the game together with his friends. This wasn’t a decision he could make by himself.

“Sure.” Nie Yan nodded. While they were still chatting, Blacksmith Kade finished forging the Flamecross Sword. It was a gorgeous, two-meter greatsword that reflected a flame-red lustre.

“It costs a total of 4 gold and 20 silver,” Nie Yan informed. He opened up a trade window and placed the Flamecross Sword inside.

The two players confirmed the trade.

“Thanks, you’ve saved me so much money. How about I give you half?” Reborn expressed his gratitude.

Nie Yan waved his hand. “No need.”

Reborn looked at Nie Yan thoughtfully. He decided not to force the issue. It might be that 1 gold was nothing in the eyes of the other party. He wondered if he should persuade his friends to join Asskickers United. It seemed like a very formidable guild.

Reborn’s group could never come to a decision on which guild to join. Some of them had their eyes on Victorious Return. Others liked the idea of joining Holy Empire. Still others wanted to wait and see. As for the newly established Asskickers United? Although they had scouted out the guild, they never had any real intention of joining. No matter how meteoric the rise of a newcomer, they could never shake the solid foundations of the well-known, established powerhouses.

After handing the Flamecross Sword to Reborn, Nie Yan gave Blacksmith Kade the blueprint and materials necessary to craft the Dullahan Cavalry Crossbow.

“Sir Demon Hunter, I have to warn you that I’m not fully confident in crafting this crossbow. There’s a 5% chance of failure. Are you sure you wish for me to craft it?” Blacksmith Kade informed, a trace of hesitation discernible in his voice.

“Yes.” Nie Yan nodded. The odds of success were greatly in his favour. If the crafting really did fail, he could only blame his poor luck.

“Sir Demon Hunter, the labour fee is 30 gold. This is the most sophisticated crossbow blueprint I’ve ever seen. I ask that you wait a while. Crafting it may take up to an hour,” said Blacksmith Kade after receiving the blueprint and materials.

Just as Reborn was about to bid farewell to Nie Yan, he overheard the conversation between him and Blacksmith Kade. His mind reeled in shock. Demon Hunter? What kind of title is that? At the current stage of the game, players with titles were few and far between. No wonder Blacksmith Kade acted so respectfully to him. On a different note, just what kind of crossbow had a labour fee of 30 gold? Not to mention Nie Yan received a 40% discount with the Demon Hunter title. It meant the original cost was 50 gold! So how valuable was this crossbow? It was probably worth upwards of several hundred gold! Even 100 gold could get you quite a few sets of Dark Gold equipment!

Reborn drew in a big breath of air. He originally believed himself

to be quite extraordinary for commissioning a greatsword with a labour fee of 7 gold. Thinking of it all, he revealed a self-mocking smile. An ordinary player would be doing quite well for themselves if they had 10 silver in their pockets. Who could've known that as soon as he compared himself with Nie Yan, 7 gold would suddenly become nothing more than chump change!

Nie Yan couldn't just sit around the smithy for an hour. That would be a huge waste of time. He informed Blacksmith Kade that he'd be back later to pick up the crossbow. He turned to Reborn and said with a faint smile, "Well, I'll be taking my leave."

"Oh, right." Reborn snapped out of his daze. He nodded. "It's about time I go back as well. My friends are waiting on me to run a dungeon."

Both of them walked out of the smithy. Nie Yan headed straight for the Starry Night Potion Shop.

Gazing at Nie Yan's gradually receding figure, Reborn had a thoughtful expression on his face.

The Starry Night Potion Shop had grown. Every day, it received the business of a tremendous number of players. Even though the front of the shop had been expanded several times over, there still wasn't enough space. Nie Yan eventually selected two plots of land from other locations, where he opened two more Tier 2 shops which would become branch locations. The players arriving to purchase potions were diverted to the two other shops. Nie Yan

opened a Tier 2 Tinkerer Shop on the plot adjacent to the Starry Night Potion Shop. It would sell all sorts of Tinker goods.. Although the market was still in its infancy, it had great potential for growth in the future.

After finishing his business at the Starry Night Potion Shop, Nie Yan withdrew another 100 gold. He teleported to Tasoyi Village and purchased ten batches of Magic Bombs in preparation for his trip to the Everlasting City with Tang Yao.

Although it seemed excessive to spend 100 gold on Magic Bombs, by the time they went through all of them, they would make back 50-60 gold from all the loot they would pick up from leveling there. They wouldn't use up too many other supplies either, so he could make everything back and then some if they picked up one or two top-quality items.

Nevertheless, in the whole of Calore, only Nie Yan dared to be so frivolous.

The daily income of the Starry Night Potion Shop was ever increasing with no signs indicating anything but a more prosperous future. It would become an ATM machine with an inexhaustible supply of money for Nie Yan.

After Nie Yan finished preparing some of the essentials, the hour was almost up. He walked back to Blacksmith Kade's smithy.

"Sir Demon Hunter, I've fulfilled your request. Here's your newly-created heavy crossbow." Blacksmith Kade placed a large

crossbow on the table.

The Dullahan Cavalry Crossbow was about 1.5 meters long. Its main body was crafted out of Magic Redwood Logs. In the eyes of any player, it was a very sophisticated piece of equipment. The surface of its limb engraved with all sorts of magic runes made the crossbow look all the more impressive. A thin metal thread, stretched very tautly, acted as the string. It was created from the Enchanted Blackvein Gold, which was known for its resilience. Embedded at the core was the Fire Essence Extract. A ball of scarlet-red flame endlessly burned within. If a bolt passed through, it would be enchanted with the blazing element of fire.

The Dullahan Cavalry Crossbow also required a higher grade of bolts. Ordinary ones would disintegrate when they passed through the small flame. At the very least, Nie Yan would have to purchase a tube of bolts priced at 1 gold or higher from an NPC shop.

If this heavy crossbow was any bigger, it would start to resemble the ballistae used to defend the towns and cities. Its immense size was frightening.

Nie Yan exerted all his strength to lift up this crossbow, but he could barely get it off the table. It actually weighed 56 lb! With his current Strength, there was no way he could use it.

He examined the properties.

Dullahan Cavalry Crossbow (Sub Legendary)

Requirements: 800 Strength

Properties: Attack 307–327, 30% Piercing Damage, 30% chance to deal 3x Critical Damage, +100 Fire Damage, Penta Bolt Shot

Range: 52 Meters

Firing Rate: 25

Weight: 56 lb

Restrictions: Thief, Paladin, Warrior

The attack power was good, and the range reached impressively far. If he camped out in one place with this crossbow, he'd be like a mobile archer tower. Better yet, its killing power was extremely astonishing.

Too bad it had a steep requirement of 800 Strength.

A pure Strength-build Berserker, after putting all their points into Strength, learning a bunch of Strength boosting passive skills, and equipping themselves with a full set of Strength boosting equipment on top of socketing them with Strength Gems, would still have to wait until they were Level 50 to reach 800 Strength.

As for a Thief aiming to reach 800 Strength at Level 50? It was next to impossible unless the player lucked out by getting a full set of godly equipment.

Nie Yan put away the Dullahan Cavalry Crossbow in his bag. Let's leave it in here for now. I'll figure out some way of equipping it later on. He retrieved the blueprint for the crossbow from

Blacksmith Kade.

Nie Yan left the smithy. His mood was no longer the same. He had finally obtained his own Sub Legendary weapon. In the previous timeline, he had never owned even a single piece of Sub Legendary equipment. Back then, he could only gaze enviously at those people showing off the properties of their godly equipment on the official forums.

Chapter 192 – Large-Scale Mobbing

With the Dullahan Cavalry Crossbow crafted, Nie Yan proceeded to his personal storage to retrieve the Level 20 Thief set, the Eternal Night of Silence, that he'd gotten in his trade with Withered Leaf. He sent a message to Tang Yao.「Come back. I'll take you to level.」

「Finally! I've been losing my mind over here grinding Scaled Frogs!」Tang Yao immediately grew excited after hearing that Nie Yan wanted to take him somewhere else to level. He hastily activated a Return Scroll to go back to Calore.

A short while later, Nie Yan met up with Tang Yao at the transfer area.

“Where's Yao Yao and Sun? Didn't they come with you?” Nie Yan asked after seeing that Tang Yao was alone.

“No, they said they didn't want to drag us down. The both of them can hunt Scaled Frogs by themselves now,” Tang Yao answered.

Nie Yan pondered for a moment. If Yao Yao and Sun did tag along, the experience shared between four players would be pretty meagre. They really might be better off hunting by themselves. At their current levels, the experience from Scaled Frogs was still pretty good. Although the drain on supplies was very high, with them constantly having to spend money to restock on Smoke Powder, the value of the loot they'd pick up would more than make

up for the costs. Besides, if they sold the surplus equipment to guild, Guo Huai would surely compensate them fairly.

“That’s fine too. It’s not like levelling on Scaled Frogs is slow either.”

“Yao Yao wants to bring Yu Lan (Blue Feather) and them along with her. She wants to help them get their levels up as well.”

Nie Yan nodded. After the matter with Victorious Return outside Blackflame Forest, Yu Lan’s team had already become loyal members of Asskickers United. Bringing their overall level up was the same as increasing the strength of the guild.

“Go prepare. We’ll set off soon,” Nie Yan said. The leaderboards showed that Heaven Breaker was already Level 26. He wasn’t sure how far behind Heaven Breaker was in experience, but he definitely couldn’t be allowed to pass Tang Yao.

“Right! I’ll be all good in just a moment!” Tang Yao deposited all of the loot he picked up into the guild treasury. He made a trip to the Starry Night Potion Shop to restock on consumables, and then to the general shop to buy a few Return Scrolls.

Once Tang Yao was back, the two of them stepped into the Calore transfer point. They each spent 15 silver to teleport to Kemento Town.

The town was almost completely empty when they arrived.

There were only a few NPCs walking on the main street. All of the maps in the vicinity of the town were quite high level. So very few, if any, players had a reason to come here at present.

In the previous timeline, Kemento was the most prosperous place for gem trade. There were several high-level maps nearby that were rich with gems, particularly Everlasting City. It produced the greatest quantity of high-quality gems. Almost every day, Jewelcrafters would arrive here in hordes to purchase gems.

Both of them left Kemento, heading south where they entered a region of plains. After travelling for ten minutes, they saw a magnificent golden castle up ahead.

Tang Yao gasped in astonishment. This golden castle was even more striking than the central district of Calore! It took up an enormous area, while at the center was a tall, majestic dome that reflected a dazzling splendor.

The Everlasting City was a remnant of the Dark Era. The atrocities committed by the dragons forced many races to find ways to defend themselves. They constructed unassailable fortresses and powerful automatons to protect their people. Even at the peak of the dragon race's dominance, the main forces of the dragons failed to take this castle. As a result, it became known as the Everlasting City.

With the passing of the Dark Era, humans gained control of this land. The goblins, who were the original inhabitants, suffered banishment because of their ugly appearances. Although the Everlasting City had never fallen, the ingenuity of the human mind

was boundless. They took to the skies on griffons, spraying a poisonous fog over the land until every last goblin was wiped out.

When one race conquered another, there was only a cruel loss of lives. Savage acts weren't limited to only dragons but other races as well.

Such was the history of the Everlasting City.

To the players, however, it was simply a Level 40 map. What spawned there were Mechanical Golems, machine-type monsters.

Nie Yan and Tang Yao arrived just outside the entrance of the Everlasting City. The six-meter tall iron gates which were tightly shut emanated a heavy, stifling pressure.

Nie Yan slowly pushed open the gates. Inside the city were open streets that were about ten meters wide. He occasionally spotted one or two skeletons, roughly the size of a child, sprawled out across the ground. They were the remains of the goblins that once lived here. In their eternal rest, they silently cursed the humans who murdered them.

“You stay here. I’ll do all the aggroing and mobbing,” Nie Yan instructed. He could only rely on the [Magic Bombs](#) to take down the Mechanical Golems. Tang Yao’s slow speed made him unsuited for the task, and his spells wouldn’t leave so much as a scratch on them. Simply put, his only purpose here was to leech experience.

Basic Magic Bomb

Requirements: 10 intelligence

Description: Deals 200 damage in a 3-meter radius and applies the Tinkerer's Curse. Effective against Ordinary, Leader, and Sub-Elite monsters Level 50 and under. Deals 300% bonus damage on Machine-type monsters.

Warning: Do not use against other players, otherwise, the user will receive the Painful Death Curse (inflicts instant death. -10% All Stats Permanently)

“How do we get that Energized Crystal Core you talked about?” Tang Yao asked.

“It doesn't drop from the regular Mechanical Golems. Every now and then, a blue one will appear among them. They're Level 50 instead of Level 40. They drop Energized Crystal Fragments. We need to collect a hundred to make an Energized Crystal Core. “

“Isn't that too simple?”

Nie Yan shook his head. “There's a total of one hundred and thirty blue Mechanical Golems in the outer ring of the Everlasting City. They won't respawn after being killed. Finding a hundred will be difficult. We also have to take into account that blue Mechanical Golems have three times more health than ordinary Mechanical Golems. We can only get so many Energized Crystal Fragments in a given day. As for whether we can find one hundred, that'll depend on our luck.”

The other option was to kill a Legendary Mechanical Golem, but that was equivalent to a Lord-class existence. He temporarily put

aside that thought for now.

Nie Yan activated Stealth before setting out. Before long, he spotted six groups of Mechanical Golems in the distance, each about twenty to thirty members in size.

Almost all of them were made out of a greyish metal. Built in a shape that somewhat resembled a drum, they were the automatons of a far-gone age. They were tall, clumsy, and walked fairly slowly. Mixed among them were a few blue coloured ones.

He inspected them with Transcendent Insight.

Gray Iron Mechanical Golems: Level 40

Health: 3,000/3,000

Blue Armoured Mechanical Golem: Level 50

Health: 8,000/8,000

Blue Armoured Mechanical Golems could only be encountered if you were one of the first to set foot into the Everlasting City. The loot they dropped was fairly good. However, they would be gone after the map was explored. The Legendary Mechanical Golem would drop an intact Energized Crystal Core after being killed for the first time. It would no longer do so in successive spawns. So there were only two Energized Crystal Cores altogether in the

entire map.

All of them were machine-type monsters. Furthermore, Elite Mechanical Golems would only appear in the central district. So the outer district was the best place to train by using Magic Bombs.

Nie Yan cautiously approached the group of Mechanical Golems until he was within shooting range. He took out his crossbow and fired at one of them.「Ding! Ding! Ding!」All three bolts struck the same target.

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Nie Yan's sudden assault alerted all twenty plus Mechanical Golems in the group. They charged at the offender, looking to pummel him into meat paste. They were still Level 40 monsters after all. Although they were considered slow and clumsy relative to other similarly levelled monsters, they were only somewhat slower than him.

Nie Yan hastily fled. As he passed by a different group of Mechanical Golems, he shot another round of bolts, aggroing them as well.

In this fashion, Nie Yan continuously aggroed monsters. Eventually, he had almost three to four hundred Mechanical Golems in a densely packed mob chasing after him from behind.

“Mother of God!” Tang Yao shouted as he stared at the enormous mass of metal barreling toward Nie Yan.

Nie Yan led these Mechanical Golems through the open streets. He turned around and threw an object from his hand which resembled a black metal ball. It flew high up, creating a parabola, then fell from the air into the crowd.

「Boom!」The Magic Bomb exploded, wreaking havoc as an enormous tongue of flame rapidly engulfed the surrounding hundred Mechanical Golems. As soon as it appeared, it departed just the same, forming a cloud of black smoke. The scene was quite spectacular.

-600, -600, -600...

A dense swath of damage values blanketed the sky. The Mechanical Golems caught in the blast radius were scorched completely black, as if they had been covered in soot.

The aggro of these Mechanical Golems grew more concentrated. They furiously pursued their target. Nie Yan noticed the Magic Bombs had come off cooldown. He turned around and threw another.

The Magic Bomb fell from the sky.「Boom」Yet another explosion swept through the crowd of Mechanical Golems.

After a while, Nie Yan threw a third, fourth, then eventually a fifth Magic Bomb fell into the crowd.「Boom!」The explosion blasted the Mechanical Golems into piles of scrap metal littering the ground.

Roughly seventy or so Mechanical Golems died. Nie Yan gained a surge of experience. Two bursts of bright light enveloped him, accompanied the ringing of two crisp system sounds. He looked at his character information. He had levelled up twice to Level 21

“Holy crap! So much experience!” Tang Yao exclaimed in excitement. He directly went from Level 26 to Level 27, 37%.

Mechanical Golems had very high health and defense, and they were already high-experience monsters to begin with. Now, with Nie Yan and Tang Yao killing them at such low levels, the experience they received was even more ludicrously high. On top of that, they were killing them in large groups. A person could hardly imagine the explosive pace they were levelling at!

Bomb after bomb was thrown into the sky to fall back to the earth.「Boom! Boom! Boom!」Explosions shook the outer district of the Everlasting City. As if the autumn gale had swept up the fallen leaves, what remained of the mob of Mechanical Golems were only bits of broken scrap metal.

Nie Yan had risen to Level 23. Tang Yao had hit Level 28.

“Go pick up the loot,” Nie Yan said to the dumbstruck Tang Yao. He checked his bag. He had only gone through thirty-nine Magic

Bombs. He still had plenty more left. That was merely the first wave!

Tang Yao stared at his level. Given that he had already seen many crazy things with Nie Yan, he still found the situation hard to believe. He had grinded Scaled Frogs for two days straight without levelling up even once. Yet in a short span of time, he had directly gone from Level 26 to Level 28? What a fierce levelling speed! He could almost imagine the reaction on Heaven Breaker's face. As he desperately tried to level up, right as he was about to reach his goal, the opponent suddenly shot up by two levels, widening the gap again. Just how demoralizing of a blow would that be?

Chapter 193 – Evolution Crystal

“You can start first. I’m going to allocate my points,” Nie Yan said as he surveyed his handiwork. Destroyed Mechanical Golems filled the streets, stretching out for fifty to sixty meters in front of him, with all sorts of items scattered out on the ground.

“Alright,” Tang Yao replied. He flipped over the frames of the Mechanical Golems, picking up the loot that had dropped.

Nie Yan looked over his character page. He had 9 stat points and 5 mastery points to allocate.¹ Without the slightest hesitation, he put all 9 points into Dexterity, bringing it up to 137 points. Now, he was only 23 points away from 160 Dexterity. Soon, he could equip the [Scarlet Poison Ring](#), and then he’d receive another significant boost in attack power.

Scarlet Poison Ring (Dark Gold)

Requirements: 120 Strength, 160 Dexterity

Properties: Attack 53-57, +20% Poison Damage, Poison Resistance +20, Ignore Level +1

Weight: 0.1 lb

Restrictions: Can be equipped by all factions

Socketing a couple of Dexterity Gems should be enough...

As for the 3 mastery points, Nie Yan allocated them into Intermediate Cloaking, Advanced Marksman, and Advanced Dual Wielding. The effects of masteries grew more pronounced at higher ranks. Cloaking made him much harder to detect by

weakening the effects of an opponent's Awareness. Generally, players with only 20–30 Awareness would be completely incapable of sensing him through stealth. Dual Wielding added 30% of the attack power of his secondary weapon to his primary weapon, allowing him to deal even more damage. Finally, Marksman boosted his attack power by 10% and increased his firing rate when he wielded a crossbow or bow.

After allocating his stat and mastery points, Nie Yan joined Tang Yao in picking up the loot on the ground. The two of them were like scavengers as they searched through piles of debris, occasionally bending down to pick something up.

Before long, all of the loot had been collected.

“I found five Energized Crystal Fragments. How about you?” Tang Yao asked. He was noticeably anxious about how many fragments were collected.

“I’ve got two fragments,” Nie Yan replied. Adding them together, they had a total of seven Energized Crystal Fragments.

Nie Yan traded his fragments to Tang Yao. In merely one wave, they had already gathered seven fragments. It was pretty decent progress. However, fragments would become harder to find the more they collected because Blue Armoured Mechanical Golems wouldn't respawn after death.

“Nice! We already have seven!” Tang Yao said in excitement. He finally saw hope.

Nie Yan sorted through the drops. They had made quite the haul, a few Life Gems (2) and Strength Gems (2), several pieces of Level 40 Silver-grade equipment, and so on. He estimated the total worth of all these items to be around 15 or 16 gold.

He had used up about 19 gold's worth of Magic Bombs in dealing with the first wave of Mechanical Golems. All in all, he was down about 3 or 4 gold. But then again, spending that much had allowed him and Tang Yao to level up four and two times respectively. It could be considered quite cost efficient.

“Get ready. I’m going to aggro the next wave,” Nie Yan said. He could only clear four more waves with the remaining Magic Bombs in his bag. Even so, it was more than good enough for him.

As Nie Yan and Tang Yao frantically levelled, an uproar erupted outside. Young Sparrow Hawk, who had stagnated for a while, had yet again explosively risen in level, leaving Heaven Breaker behind in a trail of dust. However, the community’s reaction was relatively subdued compared to the last time. Everyone was already accustomed to Tang Yao’s perverse levelling speed. Even though people were surprised, no one was foolishly running to the official forums to accuse him of cheating on behalf of Heaven Breaker. As for what the other players on the leaderboards thought? Well, that was their own business.

Tang Yao had triggered another levelling frenzy among the high-level players. The difference this time was that many of them had done their research on how to go about taking down much higher level mobs. Granted, it was costly, but there was also the potential

for significant profits. Even some players on the leaderboards began setting their sights on power-levelling through hunting monsters way above their level. The bonus experience was simply too hard to pass up. With Tang Yao serving as the role model, they were extremely enthusiastic. However, many of them ended up dying and consequently dropped out of the level leaderboards. Others found success, surging up the rankings.

Nie Yan simply didn't care what other people thought. He continued mobbing Mechanical Golems with Tang Yao.

Nie Yan aggroed four to five hundred Mechanical Golems into an imposing horde behind him. He threw Magic Bombs into the sky, one after the other, as they fell into the crowd.「Boom! Boom! Boom!」The Mechanical Golems were swept up in the blasts. Like harvesting wheat, they collapsed to the ground, more than a hundred at a time, until none were left.

The ample experience caused Nie Yan to soar to Level 26, and Tang Yao to reach level 29.

Nie Yan again put all of his free stat points into Dexterity, bringing it up to 146. He was still 14 points away from his goal. However, he could easily reach it by replacing a piece of equipment or socketing one or two Dexterity Gems.

With the Mechanical Golems disposed of, Nie Yan and Tang Yao began picking up all the loot again. They found six fragments from the second wave of Mechanical Golems.

“Hey, Nie Yan! Look here, what do you think this is?” Tang Yao asked in shock. He had picked up a brightly glowing blue crystal, about the size of a thumb, from the body of a Mechanical Golem. Because of the Energized Crystal Fragments, he paid special attention to anything that remotely resembled a crystal.

Nie Yan stared blankly at the crystal between Tang Yao’s fingers for a moment, then suddenly became ecstatic.

Every type of energy crystal was exceedingly uncommon and precious. Often, they had some rather unique applications, like the Energized Crystal Core.

The drop rate of energy crystals was only around one in fifty thousand in the whole of Everlasting City. With tens of thousands of players hunting in the map, an energy crystal might drop once every few weeks. However, whichever lucky player that got their hands on it would instantly turn rich. The money they’d earn from selling it was enough to let them purchase a full set of Dark Gold equipment with some change to spare. It was the same as someone winning ¥5,000,000 in real life!

Energy crystals were classified by colour, red being the lowest grade and the more commonly seen kind. As for blue energy crystals, they were extremely uncommon, valued at several times higher than red energy crystals. Above that were purple energy crystals. However, they were even rarer than Legendary-grade equipment.

They had only cleared two waves of Mechanical Golems. Who would’ve thought a blue energy crystal would drop?

Nie Yan couldn't help but let out an appreciative sigh. Being the first to explore a map really was great.

"Let me see," Nie Yan said.

Tang Yao handed the energy crystal over. Nie Yan examined its properties.

Evolution Crystal (Single Use): Allows a summoned creature to permanently possess evolution energy.

Below was a whole bunch of information pertaining to the crystal, including an explanation on its use.

It was actually an Evolution Crystal! Nie Yan couldn't help but sigh at his luck. It was one of the rarest types of energy crystals. It could make summoned creatures undergo a change, granting them low-level intelligence and a persistent summon duration.

For example, feeding an Evolution Crystal to an Arcane Fairy would trigger a transformation, giving the creature an evolved ability which was selected at random. However, using it this way was clearly a waste because an Arcane Fairy already had a persistent summon duration.

If Nie Yan used Undead Rite to take control of an undead monster

and fed it the Evolution Crystal, it would become a permanent summon. Since the level of summoned creatures couldn't be raised, it wasn't a good idea to use an Evolution Crystal at lower levels. It was best to find a pet that could level up.

In the previous timeline, someone had fed an Evolution Crystal to their mantis-type pet. That catalyzed its evolution into the infamous Phantom Mantis which could stealth and ambush like a Thief. It was very formidable.

The price of an Evolution Crystal would remain high, even at the later stages of the game. There was no need to ever worry about it depreciating in value.

“Can this thing revive my Arcane Fairy?” Tang Yao asked with a hint of expectation. He hoped that the Evolution Crystal was the same as the Energized Crystal Core, possessing the ability to revive a summoned creature.

“No.” Nie Yan shook his head.

“Ah, forget it then. You can keep it,” Tang Yao said. He wasn't the least bit interested in the Evolution Crystal, let alone have any thoughts of feeding it to his Arcane Fairy.

Nie Yan wondered if he would even get a chance to use the Evolution Crystal in the future. After all, things like pets were too rare. Out of thirty to forty thousand players, maybe one or two of them would own one. He didn't have any thoughts about using it on a summoned creature for now, since most of them couldn't be

levelled up, unless he could find some extremely rare summoned creature.

Nie Yan stored the Evolution Crystal away in his bag. Even though he had spent 100 gold on this trip, there was nothing to feel regretful about because the value of the Evolution Crystal far surpassed that amount. It was in no way inferior to a Sub Legendary item.

After clearing three more waves of Mechanical Golems, Tang Yao broke through to Level 30. Before reaching Level 60, he would add 4 points into Intelligence and 1 point into Focus.

As for Nie Yan, he just hit Level 29. Because he was responsible for most of the damage, he received a larger share of the experience.

He had completely used up all 200 Magic Bombs. Not a single one remained.

Apart from the Evolution Crystal, the estimated value of all the other stuff they looted was around 80 gold. Of course, it couldn't all be transformed into money at once.

“Are we going to keep buying Magic Bombs to level up?” Tang Yao asked. This kind of levelling was undoubtedly fast, but it was also very costly!

If they continued going at this pace, the Starry Night Potion Shop

would quickly run out of money because of them.

“How many fragments have we found so far?” Nie Yan asked.

“Thirty-six,” Tang Yao replied after looking into his bag. He was still a long ways off.

“Of course we’re going to keep going. I’m going back to shop. There should still be enough money left to support us for today, ” Nie Yan replied. Reviving Tang Yao’s Arcane Fairy was also an important matter. The money spent could always be earned back. In fact, they had made quite a bit from levelling so far. As for a potential lack of funds later on, he still had plenty of ways to reap a profit.

Just as the two of them were about to go back to buy Magic Bombs, they received an urgent message. Something had happened over at the guild! Nie Yan suddenly had a very uneasy feeling in his heart.

Chapter 194 – Decision!

Nie Yan and Tang Yao took out Return Scrolls, then teleported back to Calore. Stepping out of the transfer point, they hurried to the Asskickers United guild headquarters.

Guo Huai and many other important members of the guild were sitting in the meeting hall. They all stood up when the two arrived.

A dozen or so members gathered together, including Resplendent Bladelight, Leader Young Seven, Undying Scoundrel, and Azure Yarn Thread. All of them wore grave expressions. It was clear they had been discussing something grim beforehand.

“You guys are back!” Guo Huai stepped forward to greet them.

“What happened?” Nie Yan asked. Guo Huai would’ve never called them back so anxiously were it not something urgent.

“It’s Unhindered. I don’t know how, but they discovered the location of our elite team and sent a force of over a thousand players to surround them. We suffered eighteen casualties. Luckily, Bladelight and Young Seven were on guard. They managed to escape, thanks to the rest of the members shielding them,” Guo Huai explained. As soon as he found out that the elite team had been ambushed, he hurriedly notified Nie Yan and Tang Yao. On top of that, he sent out a large number of guild members to rescue Bladelight’s group, but it was already too late. A team of twenty players surrounded by over a thousand enemies stood no chance. The battle ended quickly and without any fanfare.

Bladelight and Young Seven surviving was purely a fluke of luck.

Nie Yan's expression turned gloomy. Losing ninety percent of the elite team was a devastating blow. Every single member was a precious treasure to the guild! They had splendid achievements under the leadership of Bladelight and Young Seven. However, this incident would set them behind by at least half a week.

“Were any of the members killed branded with red names?” Nie Yan asked. If one of them died while under the PKer status, consequently dropping all their gear, then that would be even more depressing. It would basically be the same as losing a member of the elite team!

“No. Luckily, Bladelight and Young Seven showed restraint. They didn't let the other team members attack first.”

It was good that no moles had snuck their way into the elite team. Otherwise, if a situation like what happened outside of Blackflame recurred, they would've taken an even heavier hit. But even so, the losses they'd suffered were still considerable.

Nie Yan was fuming with anger. He hadn't gone to Unhindered to look for trouble, but they had come banging on his door. He would not let them off lightly!

“It's our fault. This wouldn't have happened if we had noticed the signs earlier,” Young Seven said, referring to himself and Bladelight, the two leaders of the team. As he recalled the teammates who had died for his sake, he couldn't help but feel a

twinge of pain in his chest. They had put in great effort to suit each member up with the best gear available. Who could've known that it would end up falling into the hands of Unhindered? He blamed himself for not staying more alert.

“This matter arose because of me. I didn't expect Hei Zhuo (Black Amazing) to act against us,” Bladelight said. He should've anticipated such an outcome sooner. He had taken away so many people from Unhindered. How did he think the other side was going to react? It would be strange if Hei Zhuo didn't already hate him to the bone. However, because Asskickers United was far stronger than Unhindered, he mistakenly believed that Hei Zuo's common sense would prevent him from doing something like ambushing them. So he had never considered the threat seriously.

“What's happened has happened. Nothing will come out of blaming yourself. However, this matter isn't as simple as it seems!” Nie Yan's eyes flashed with a cold light. Whoever acted against his people shouldn't expect to keep their heads! As the boss of the guild, it was imperative that he settle this grievance.

“I've just received word that Unhindered has joined Victorious Return as a branch guild!” Guo Huai announced to everyone.

“No wonder they acted so arrogantly!” No longer able to hold himself back, Undying Scoundrel blurted, “Boss, we should go after those bastards!”

He was good friends with several members of the elite team. All of them had been killed in the ambush!

“Calm down. Let’s hear what the boss has to say,” Azure Yarn Thread, sitting beside him, placated in a cool voice.

Nie Yan wrinkled his brows at the new revelation. Even at a conservative estimate, Unhindered had at least 20,000 members. Although they weren’t very powerful, in part because Bladelight had taken away almost all of the guild’s top rankers with him, a force of 20,000–30,000 players couldn’t be looked down on. If all of them went over to Victorious Return, it would definitely have an impact on the future.

Guo Huai and the others stared at Nie Yan, waiting for his decision.

Only then did Azure Yarn Thread and Undying Scoundrel sense the atmosphere in the meeting hall change. It seemed that the person who called the shots in the guild was Nie Yan all along.

“What are we going to do? Should we declare war on Unhindered?” Guo Huai asked. The guild’s elite team had been essentially wiped out. If they didn’t respond, it would be seen as a sign of weakness to the outside world. However, declaring a full-on war meant that they would have to invest a significant amount of resources and manpower to deal with the forces of Unhindered. He felt with utmost certainty that Victorious Return would take part as well. In such a scenario, the growth of the entire guild would slow to a complete halt.

Even Victorious Return didn’t dare to rashly war with another

guild, to say nothing of Asskickers United. Now was the time for rapid expansion. By starting a war, they would be crippling the future of the guild! Besides, even if they did win the war, they still wouldn't be able to eliminate Unhindered.

All of the members of Asskickers United were anxiously awaiting the decision of the higher-ups. After being bullied to such an extent, they were no longer willing to suffer in silence. This matter could not simply be ignored!

If the person that had moved against them was Heaven Breaker, they would've still been able to endure. After all, Victorious Return was currently the top guild in Calore. They had great influence. Everyone was in collective agreement that by showing restraint now, there'd inevitably be a day when they would take them down. However, what was Unhindered? It was nothing more than a small guild! If even small fry like them could wantonly piss and shit on their heads without fear of retaliation, then what reason would they have left to still stay in the guild!?

Nie Yan's decision would directly influence the future direction of the entire guild.

"We were infiltrated by moles from Unhindered. It's because we didn't take enough precautions to guard against something like this that they were able to lock down our positions. Should we give that explanation to the guild members?" Young Seven asked. He understood that going to war with Unhindered was a fruitless endeavor. It would only drag them into a deeper hole. A group had gone out to surround Unhindered's forces. Very soon, their levels would plummet.

“No need!” Nie Yan shook his head. This wasn’t the best solution. Victorious Return was monitoring the situation closely. If Asskickers United tried to weather out the storm, they would go on the offensive, making sure that their cowardice was known to all corners of the community. There would only be one conclusion. The low-ranking members of the guild would lose all respect for the higher-ups.

“Everyone, look at the forums!” Guo Huai said. Following the incident, he had been paying close attention to the forums. A new thread had popped up with a video of Unhindered’s forces surrounding and killing the elite team of Asskickers United. There was even a caption under the video with the following words of provocation:

「Asskickers United, do you have the balls to fight us? 」

“Fuck! Nirvana Flame, let’s destroy them!” Tang Yao could no longer hold himself back.

“Where’s Unhindered right now?” Nie Yan inquired.

“According to the information I received, Unhindered’s forces are at Kiln Fire Woods doing a group clear to level up. They’re likely waiting for us to arrive! Our members won’t be able to endure any longer, especially those who were previously a part of Unhindered. They’re hollering for us to let them go there to settle the score. I’ve told every group captain to pacify the members under them, settle down for now, and await your orders,” Guo Huai

replied.

“Take note of the people who are trying to stir the pot. When all of this is over, boot them from the guild,” Nie Yan said. They were definitely sent over by Hei Zhuo to incite the guild members into taking action. However, it wasn’t suitable to deal with them at such a sensitive time. That would have to wait until the matter was settled.

“This is probably a scheme made by Heaven Breaker,” Bladelight said. He knew Hei Zuo’s personality well. He wasn’t the type to do something unless there was something in it for him. If Victorious Return hadn’t promised him some sort of benefit, he definitely wouldn’t have gone out of his way to offend Asskickers United.

“If Victorious Return is pulling the strings from behind the scenes, it’ll all be useless no matter how much of our forces we send. Instead, we might actually end up falling into a trap,” Guo Huai expressed his concerns. However, if they didn’t respond to the provocations, with Unhindered making such a scene at Kiln Fire Woods, it was a clear indicator that Asskickers United had chosen to submit to humiliation. From then on, the members of Asskickers United would never be able to lift their heads in public again.

This was a naked insult!

Nie Yan coldly smiled. Heaven Breaker was truly deserving of his reputation for coming up with such a heinous plot. However, Asskickers United wouldn’t stand idly by, waiting to be plucked off like sitting ducks.

Nie Yan analyzed the situation. As it currently stood, Asskickers United was stuck between a rock and a hard place. If they declared war, the forces they mobilized were guaranteed to be eaten by Victorious Return in one gulp. However, how could they not fight? With Unhindered getting so cocky at Kiln Fire Woods, all eyes were on them.

Maybe Holy Empire, Sapphire Shrine, and Battle Crazy Alliance were also watching how Asskickers United was going to handle this matter. Asking them to join the fray was definitely impossible. Their relationship with Nie Yan wasn't at that level yet.

Asskickers United didn't have any outside support!

"Kiln Fire Woods, let me think..." Nie Yan muttered. He couldn't be any more familiar with that map. It had karst topography, rock formations everywhere. It was a forested region full of iron trees, and Level 25 Rock Monsters spawned there. Beneath the map was a huge underground world known as the Dark Dead Zone. It was inhabited by Level 25 Viper Flies. Hidden in dark crevices and corners, they often attacked in groups, appearing when least expected. If you were bitten, your whole body would become paralyzed. As a result, very few players dared to go there to level. The underground world had a total of seven entrances, all of which were well-hidden.

Nie Yan suddenly had a very dangerous thought.

Kiln Fire Woods.

Nie Yan turned to Guo Huai, and said, “Have some people go to the Starry Night Potion Shop to retrieve some Anti-Paralysis Potions. Tell them to hurry!”

“How many do we need?”

“A hundred bottles should do.”

“Is that really enough?” Guo Huai asked in surprise.

Nie Yan nodded. “It’s enough.” He turned to the rest of the people in the room and asked, “Any of you interested in massacring Unhindered with me?”

“Me!” Tang Yao shouted.

“I’m willing!” Undying Scoundrel also joined in.

“Me too!”

More than a dozen members in the room volunteered enthusiastically.

Chapter 195 – Hundred Thief Task Force

Nie Yan swept his eyes over the fired up crowd. They were the cream of the crop, the best of the best, and suited with the best gear the guild had available. Even when compared to the top-elites of Victorious Return, they wouldn't be found lacking in any respect. They were some of the most highly-skilled players in Calore!

A group like this was enough!

Nie Yan turned to Guo Huai and said, "Beside the Anti-Paralysis Potions, tell Bird hand over anything else, Intermediate Health Potions, Intermediate Mana Potions, Intermediate Invisibility Potions..." He continued, "Today, we're going to spill a river of blood!"

Guo Huai nodded. "Alright, I've informed the subordinates making the errands."

"What exactly are you planning to do?" Zhao Li asked.

"With too many people going, our forces will end up getting dragged into a quagmire. We're better off sending a select few," Nie Yan replied. There were certain advantages in smaller numbers, particularly in the aspect of mobility. He was going to oppose Unhindered by employing guerrilla tactics. It would allow him to properly teach them a lesson.

"With only you guys?" Zhao Li stared at Nie Yan in shock.

“Yep, just these people are enough,” Nie Yan said. Instead, too many people would make them larger targets.

“A lot of guild members are still levelling outside. Do you want me to call them back?” Guo Huai asked, slightly worried the number of people in Nie Yan’s group wasn’t enough.

Nie Yan shook his head. “No need. Let them continue levelling.”

Seeing that Nie Yan had made his decision, Guo Huai knew any further attempts at dissuading him would prove fruitless. With a helpless sigh, he said, “Alright, please be careful then. I still feel it’s extremely dangerous for you to go with such little numbers.”

Nie Yan turned around and said in a strict tone, “There won’t be many of us on this operation, and it’ll be very dangerous. Those of you who don’t want to take part can leave now. Those who are willing to stay, state your names!”

“Blowhard Summer Bug!”

“Leader Young Seven!”

“Undying Scoundrel!”

“Young Sparrow Hawk!”

“Blue Yarn Thread!”

...

Nie Yan looked over the crowd. None of them had shrunk away from the task. He gave a satisfied nod. “Good! I’m glad to know that we don’t have cowards in my guild!”

“Boss, what are we going to do?” Undying Scoundrel asked.

“Go prepare first. We’ll be getting a delivery of potions soon. I’ll explain my plan then. If you need to resupply before we set off, make sure to buy extra. We’re going to have a very long and hard battle ahead of us!” Nie Yan said. He wanted to stock up on Intermediate Flash Powder and other items that might be of use as well. On a different note, he could now wear the set of Level 25 Gold equipment he’d gotten from Withered Leaf. Its stat bonuses would give him enough Dexterity to finally equip the [Scarlet Poison Ring](#).

Scarlet Poison Ring (Dark Gold)

Requirements: 120 Strength, 160 Dexterity

Properties: Attack 53-57, +20% Poison Damage, Poison Resistance +20, Ignore Level _1

Weight: 0.1 lb.

Restrictions: Can be equipped by all factions

“Young Sparrow Hawk, stay here. You don’t need to take part in this operation,” Nie Yan said to Tang Yao.

“But why?” Tang Yao asked in an unwilling tone.

“We can’t afford to have you dying and dropping levels,” Nie Yan replied. He was a Thief. Under normal circumstances, he felt confident in his ability to survive. He couldn’t say the same for the players who played other classes in the group, especially the Mages. The difference was that if the other members died, their equipment could be replaced, and their levels could be grinded back without suffering many repercussions. However, if Tang Yao died, it would shake the entire guild!

Tang Yao stayed silent for a moment, then let out a reluctant sigh. “Fine, I understand...”

Nie Yan did a headcount of the people here: Resplendent Bladelight, Leader Young Seven, Undying Scoundrel, Monochrome, Blue Yarn Thread, Blowhard Summer Bug, Miracle Dancer, and Edgeless Including him, there were nine members altogether. Bladelight was a Fighter. Young Seven was a Priest. Undying Scoundrel was an Elementalist. Blue Yarn Thread was a Paladin. Blowhard Summer Bug was an Arcane Mage. Miracle Dancer was a Holy Mage. Finally, both Monochrome and Edgeless were Berserkers.

Guo Huai, Zhao Li, and Hao Cheng definitely couldn’t take part. They weren’t high enough level. Even if they did go, they’d only be throwing their lives away.

Nine people were already enough.

In the previous timelines, they were all players who had received the peak titles for their respective classes!

Just as Nie Yan had finalized all of the members of the strike force, a person burst through the doors of the meeting hall.

“Big Brother! I heard we’re going to duke it out with Unhindered!” Sun asked, panting for breath.

“Right, we’re going to give them a taste of their own medicine!” Nie Yan said with a faint smile.

“A taste of their own medicine? Are all of the guild members going?” Sun asked in surprise.

“Nope, just us few.”

“Let me go too! I promise I won’t drag you down!” Sun said.

Although Sun couldn’t compare to his peak self in the previous timeline, he was already displaying astonishing skill. After receiving Nie Yan’s personal guidance for so many days, he had shown remarkable improvement. Previously, he was able to take on three equal-levelled players from Victorious Return before dying. Now, he could manage that without even breaking a sweat. On top of that, he was a Thief, so his self-preservation abilities were definitely passable. Nie Yan nodded his head. “Alright, you can come.”

“Is there anything else you need me to do?” Guo Huai asked. Asskickers United had always been forced on the defensive. The players of the guild had been bullied for far too long. Nie Yan’s group had no choice but to dive into danger to settle the matter.

Nie Yan’s eyes filled with a frigid coldness. He originally wanted to avoid directly coming to blows with Victorious Return, to wait until the guild had grown enough to deal a decisive strike. However, since they’d moved against him repeatedly, he had no qualms about executing his plans ahead of schedule. Otherwise, they really would start to believe that his guild was easy to bully. He turned to Guo Huai and said, “I want you to monitor Victorious Return and Unhindered’s forces closely. So long as you discover any movement, immediately report it back to me. Other than that, I want you to pick a hundred of the most skilled Thief players in the guild. They have to be completely reliable. Assign them the best equipment, and order them to repeatedly launch ambushes on the players from Victorious Return!”

Nie Yan had a special purpose for setting up such a task force. Thieves held an absolute advantage when mounting sneak attacks, engaging and retreating as they pleased. Even if there were many of them, they were still extremely adaptable. They could be split up into smaller groups to take on multiple operations at once, as well as gathered back together to deliver a frontal assault on the teams of Victorious Return and Unhindered. It would be even better if they could locate the main team of Victorious Return. More often than not, a thousand players wasn’t necessary to annihilate a rival guild’s main team. A hundred Thief players could do the same job!

Guo Huai’s eyes lit up. “We can turn this hundred-Thief task

force into the ultimate weapon of the guild! By providing them with the best skill books, equipment, and other resources and benefits, the players will treat joining the task force as an honour!” He really was worthy of his family’s business background. Despite Nie Yan only briefly touching on the subject, he immediately realized the benefits of this proposal.

“I’ll let you handle the arrangements. In the future, they’ll have priority on all the Thief equipment in the guild. If they end up dying during an operation, make sure to handle the matter properly by giving them enough compensation,” Nie Yan said. He had a lot of confidence in Guo Huai’s ability to handle the tasks given to him.

“Don’t worry. I already know what must be done. I’ll make sure that other guilds will cower in fear whenever our guild’s hundred Thief task force is mentioned!” Guo Huai confidently declared. Asskickers United might be small in size, but they weren’t inferior to any major guild in the number of experts. Even if other guilds followed suit and created similar task forces later on, he’d make Asskicker United’s the most renowned!

Nie Yan made his decision. In the future, Asskickers United wouldn’t become the largest guild, but it would definitely become the guild with the most top players! It was only because they had focused their efforts on recruiting talented individuals into the guild that they were now able to form a powerful hundred Thief task force and still have some manpower to spare.

The group began making their preparations. Nie Yan headed to Tasoyi Village to buy several batches of Flash Powder. He gave at

least five pouches each to every member. Furthermore, the potions from the Starry Night Potion Shop had arrived.

Intermediate Health Potions, Intermediate Mana Potions, Junior Magic Amplification Potions, Anti-Paralysis Potions, etc... there were six to seven hundred bottles in total. The sheer number of expensive potions was enough to daze everyone in the room. Nie Yan divided the potions equally among the group, with everyone receiving sixty to seventy bottles each.

Each member of the group had already finished their own preparations, stocking up an excess of consumables. Nie Yan got Guo Huai to give skill books to everyone, the two Mages in particular. They received a few long-range spells that would definitely prove useful.

Nie Yan also put on the set of Gold equipment. It was an agility-based set that consisted of gloves, leg guards, cloak, and leather chest armour. It boosted his speed considerably and added 37 points to Dexterity, allowing him to equip the Scarlet Poison Ring without a hitch. His attack power soared to 502 points. It had reached such a terrifying degree that he'd be able to deal almost 400 damage against cloth-armoured classes. Even against thick plate-armoured Warriors, he'd still be able to deal 200–300 damage.

He also received a set bonus—Erase Presence +10%, Movement Speed +20%, Critical +12. It could be considered very formidable.

Even the members of the guild were unaware that Nie Yan had quietly set off with his special strike force. Each of them moved

separately. Twenty minutes later, they converged just outside of Link Town.

The party of ten quietly advanced toward Kiln Fire Woods, staying completely out of sight of other players.

At present, Kiln Fire Woods was unusually lively. Around eight thousand players from Unhindered had set up camp here, driving away all other players. Their members could be seen levelling everywhere in groups of fifty to sixty, or a hundred.

Back in Calore, everyone was paying close attention to the movements in Kiln Fire Woods to see the response of Asskickers United. After all, Unhindered had struck a nerve with this newly-arisen superpower by ambushing their main team!

With them being so arrogant, would Asskickers United dare to answer their provocations?

Everyone was watching intently, but there were no movements from the other side. Reportedly many players from Asskickers United were still levelling outside. None of them had been recalled to the guild headquarters.

If Asskickers United truly did turn coward, all of its members would suffer the disdain of the playerbase, and in the future, not a single person would want to join the guild.

There was a [lava cavern](#) just outside of Kiln Fire Woods. Its

entrance was shrouded in a pitch-black darkness, allowing no one to peek inside. It emanated a sinister feeling.

As of late, no players dared to enter this cavern. It was labeled as a region of death because of the players that had ventured inside, not a single one made it out alive.

Nie Yan's group entered the lava cavern. They travelled further along the tunnel, occasionally hearing odd noises echoing from deeper within.

“Boss, are you sure we can get to the Kiln Fire Forest from here?” a somewhat hesitant voice rang out.

Chapter 196 – Yu Long

“Are you sure they’ll come?” Hei Zhuo turned to the three players who were sent over from Victorious Return to act as supervisors.

All the preparations were set. If the forces of Asskickers United emerged, regardless of whether they arrived in thousands or tens of thousands, they would find themselves immediately surrounded and ambushed by a force that dwarfed them by at least several-fold.

If Asskickers United ignored the provocations, Victorious Return would spread word of their cowardice to all facets of the internet so that they’d never be able to raise their heads out in public again. Inversely, if they tried to retaliate, no matter how many players they sent, Kiln Fire Woods would become their burial place. In either scenario, their reputation would still suffer a heavy blow.

Asskickers United had nowhere left to retreat!

The group from Victorious Return was led by a Paladin called Yu Long. Clad in the Level 25 Holy Knight Radiance Set, he emanated the aura of a soldier. His face was calm and tranquil, making it difficult for anyone to ever know what he was thinking.

Even Hei Zhuo, the guild leader of Unhindered, didn’t dare to slight him.

He was the second-in-command in all of Victorious Return. He

was originally the leader of the Dragon Drive gaming organization. However, after some financial investments, Heaven Breaker eventually brought them under his banner, and Yu Long himself benefited by gaining a 20% share of Victorious Return. It was precisely because of the elite members of Dragon Drive propping up the entire guild that Victorious Return was able to reach the apex. Even Heaven Breaker treated Yu Long with an air of politeness.

In terms of skill, Heaven Breaker was somewhat inferior to Yu Long, though that was par for the course considering he wasn't a professional player. In fact, much of his game knowledge actually came from Yu Long. In order to preserve his prestige in the guild, it was necessary for him to be higher than Yu Long on the level leaderboards. Yu Long naturally knew his own position, which was why he always lagged behind Heaven Breaker by a step. Even Heaven Breaker didn't know Yu Long's true strength. Every time they sparred, Yu Long would purposefully hold back, letting him win. Of course, Heaven Breaker understood the meaning of such a gesture, so he never questioned it. The two men maintained an extremely delicate balance. In the eyes of the guild members and the outside world, however, Yu Long was much less well-known than Heaven Breaker.

"Does it matter?" Yu Long faintly smiled. "However, I don't believe they'll just sit and do nothing. If they don't come, they'll be mocked as weaklings. If they come, even though they'll be annihilated by the combined forces of Unhindered and Victorious Return, they can still preserve their honour. If I belonged to the higher-ups of Asskickers United, I'd choose the latter option."

Hei Zhuo naturally understood this logic. But at present,

Asskickers United hadn't shown any signs of movement. He truly couldn't tell what exactly they were intending to do.

“Just wait patiently. They won't be able to last past today. Even if their higher-ups can stick it out, I'm afraid the lower ranking members aren't nearly as steadfast. It's only a matter of time before they riot. When that moment comes, I want to see exactly how they'll clean up the mess!” Yu Long said. The situation developed as planned. Everything was under full control.

There was a reason why they were targeting Asskickers United in such a way. Their growth had surpassed all expectations. It was starting to become a huge cause for concern for both Yu Long and Heaven Breaker. At the rate at which things were developing, if they didn't suppress them now, Victorious Return would soon be overtaken by them. Furthermore, the relationship between Asskickers United and Holy Empire was far too close for comfort. Add Sapphire Shrine and Battle Crazy Alliance into the mix, and even the joint forces of Victorious Return, Radiant Sacred Flame, and the several other guilds they were secretly allied with could only play second fiddle to the combined strength of those four guilds.

However, Asskickers United was truly too low-key, to the extent that it was incredibly difficult to find any information that could be used against them. Even members of the guild never wore guild emblems when going out to level. It gave people a feeling of not knowing what to do. Now, Victorious Return had finally found an opportunity, and they would not easily let it go. After meticulously laying out a trap, they succeeded in forcing the enemy into a position where they were unable to advance or retreat. The next step was to see how they were going to respond.

Yu Long was slightly curious about the guild leader of Asskickers United, Young Sparrow Hawk. Just what was it that allowed his guild to soar so quickly to prominence? Victorious Return had fought for dominance in every popular virtual reality game. Only after six years of development were they able to reach their current level of achievement, possess a foundation that would make others sigh with admiration, and become an undisputed powerhouse. Yet Asskickers United, despite the fact that no one had ever heard their name before, somehow attracted enough experts to establish an elite team. One that could clear over a dozen of the main scenario dungeons in a single day. Did this occur just because their guild leader had risen to the top spot on the level leaderboards?

Yu Long shook his head. It would never be that simple. He had a premonition that Asskickers United would become Victorious Return's greatest obstacle on the road to dominance.

While Nie Yan and the other players in his group travelled through the dark tunnels of the lava cavern, they found themselves suddenly besieged by a horde of Viper Flies lunging at them from every nook and cranny. These creatures hidden in the darkness were the perfect ambush predators!

The cave was densely packed with such monsters.

“So many monsters!” Undying Scoundrel cried out in alarm.

Just as they got into a defensive formation to fight off these Viper

Flies...

Deterrence!

After Nie Yan activated the skill, the Viper Flies quickly retreated one after the other, opening up a path forward, no longer daring to approach his group again.

“Woah! What kind of skill is that!? It’s so miraculous!” Blue Yarn Thread, Blowhard Summer Bug, and the others stared at Nie Yan in shock. It seemed like he was a never-ending box of surprises, always bringing out one amazing thing after the other.

“Deterrence, it’s a supplementary skill from the Demon Hunter title,” Nie Yan replied.

“A title?”

They hadn’t yet obtained even the lowest-ranking of titles, let alone some flashy, advanced one like Demon Hunter.

“Not just Young Sparrow Hawk, but Nirvana Flame is super high-level as well! The two of you level way too quickly! After all of this is over, you should take us levelling with you!”

“Yeah!” Edgeless and the others in the group echoed off one another.

Edgeless was a fairly quiet person for someone who played a Berserker. He normally wasn't fond of talking, but even he gradually opened up to everyone in the group. In the previous timeline, his distinguished name rang like thunder in the ears of all players. He was one of the strongest Sword Saints!

These players were going to be the pillars of strength for the guild in the future!

Nie Yan thought for a moment, then said, "After we settle this matter, I, your selfless boss, will take a big hit by helping each of you reach Level 30! Afterwards, you'll be on your own."

"Yay! Long live the boss!" cheered the crowd.

If they trained together with Nie Yan and Tang Yao, it wouldn't merely be experience grinding but rather all-out power-leveiling! No one would believe that you could go from Level 26 to Level 28 in only half an hour. But Nie Yan and Tang Yao accomplished such a feat!

As the group of players fraternized more and more, Nie Yan gradually found himself becoming their beloved and respected leader. Towards their almost fanatical gazes of reverence, Nie Yan truly felt a little flattered. After all, they were future Shadow Dancers, Guardians, Sword Saints, Magisters, and so on.

These dazzling titles were something an ordinary player could never hope to reach!

Nie Yan suddenly had an idea. What if he brought these elite players with him to level in Everlasting City? That way Tang Yao could gather 100 Energized Crystal Fragments in no time! What's more, the top of the level leaderboards would be overrun with players from Asskickers United! How spectacular of a sight would that be?

These contracted players were closely tied to the interests of Asskickers United. They were very reliable. So long as he had them sworn to secrecy, it was unlikely that they would leak any information about Everlasting City.

However, there was a slight problem. Even if Nie Yan withdrew everything from the Starry Night Potion Shop down to the last copper, he still wouldn't have enough money to afford the Magic Bombs needed to get all these players to Level 30. He could only let them think of a way themselves. Several of them could form a party, sharing the burden equally. If they sold whatever they find, they could just barely scrounge up enough gold to make do.

He only feared that by the time that they got their levels up, they would have already become poor wretches saddled with unseemly amounts of debt.

Which was why this would remain an idea for the time being. His main priority was dealing with the current matter at hand.

Nie Yan and company finally reached the exit. Stepping out of the cavern, they hid themselves behind some boulders.

There was a lot of player activity in the distance. Presumably, they belonged to Unhindered.

“Sun and I will scout ahead!” Nie Yan said. Naturally, the task of finding a safe path would go to the two Thieves.

“Boss, be careful. You too, Sun.”

Nie Yan nodded. While his body gradually turned illusory, he gave a faint smile before departing.

Sun set out in a different direction.

The woods were dead silent. The Unhindered players hadn't the slightest inkling that a group from Asskickers United had silently arrived. The way they saw it, this was the hinterlands of the Kiln Fire Woods. If a fight did break out with Assskickers United, the first signs of activity would surely be near the borders of the map. They felt completely safe.

However, at present, Nie Yan's group noiselessly appeared among them.

There were at least two hundred Unhindered players in the vicinity, divided into three groups. All of them were located in different locations, clearing out mobs in their respective areas. One group was one hundred members in size, while the other two were fifty each.

Nie Yan and Sun scouted further ahead. About seventeen minutes later, they had a clear picture of the surroundings. Even if they alerted Unhindered's forces by attacking one of the groups, it would still take the nearest groups at least five minutes to reinforce them.

Simply put, they had to finish the fight and retreat all within five minutes!

Nie Yan and Sun regrouped with the others.

"Boss, how'd it go?"

"Prepare to move out. We're going to take down the hundred-man group in the east first! We'll have to make it quick!" Nie Yan said. They were outnumbered ten to one. It might be a little challenging, but it definitely wasn't impossible. The ten players who arrived were the elites of the elites. Meanwhile, the players on the opposing side were nothing more than ordinary players. He estimated that even the strongest players among them were still Level 20 at most!

But even so, Nie Yan's group still had to properly plan things out. It was essential for the area-of-effect spells of the two Mages to cover the as many targets as possible for the battle to quickly end.

"Are you guys prepared to be branded as PKers?" Nie Yan asked, sweeping his gaze over the faces of the group members. Some were still juvenile. Others were mature. However, all of them showed firm resolve.

“It’s just a red name. With you supporting us, we have nothing to be afraid of!” Edgeless said in a straightforward manner.

“Yeah! In any case, we’re already eating your food and drinking your wine, so what’s there to fear?” Undying Scoundrel’s words made the rest of the group to burst out in laughter.

“I guess it’s settled then. Let’s go get some exercise, stretch our legs, and cut down some fools!” Nie Yan revealed a cold, murderous smile. “Anyone who offends our guild... dies!”

Chapter 197 – Ten Men Massacre!

Bubbles of volcanic gas trapped beneath the Kiln Fire Woods would occasionally find their way to the surface, erupting forth into the atmosphere as scorching jets.

The temperature here was much higher than in other regions. It was similar to arriving near the crater of an active volcano. Only the hardiest of plant life could grow in this harsh environment, such as the resilient iron palm trees, lush with dense canopies that seemed to cover the earth and hide the sky.

It was said that magma regularly flowed beneath the Kiln Fire Woods, ever-ready to erupt.

Level 20 Molten Rock Monsters spawned inside the Kiln Fire Woods. They possessed high health and defense. A player would even take fire damage if they got near them. However, they were relatively slow and lacked long-range attacks. Add this to the fact that they gave good experience, and it became clear why they were the perfect mobs for Mages to level on.

Molten Rock Monsters were covered in thick plates of stone, roughly two meters in height, and resembled bulldozers when they moved.

A dense cluster of one hundred Unhindered players was currently battling over twenty Molten Rock Monsters in a corner of the map. With the Warriors forming a human wall, the Mages in the rear let loose a wave of spells which arced through the air before

bombarding the group of monsters.「Boom! Boom! Boom!」

The concentrated shelling of magic killed over ten Molten Rock Monsters.

Before long another wave of spells rained down from the sky, annihilating the survivors.

The Mages who were low on mana took out various consumables or sat down to recuperate. Those who didn't expend as much prepared for the next bout.

Roughly five seconds later, about twenty Molten Rock Monsters appeared in the previously cleared area.

The spawn rate of these mobs was astonishing!

Evidently, Unhindered didn't lack people with good taste; they secured such a top notch levelling spot.

Five Mages sat on the ground, resting and chatting together. They were at the very end of the backline, far away from any action.

“Boss, our former brothers over at Asskickers United are telling us to join them. Should we go?” a skinny Arcane Mage with a slightly wretched appearance asked the Holy Mage beside him.

The Holy Mage called [Bird Person](#) shook his head. “Joining Asskickers United? That’s suicidal! Didn’t you see that Hei Zhuo joined forces with Victorious Return to deal with them? Unhindered doesn’t amount to much, but do you think Victorious Return is a good guild to provoke? Asskickers United is doomed. Skinny Strip, we might not mind you talking about this since we’re a tight-knit group, but under no circumstances should you bring it up to other members in the guild!”

The characters for Bird Person is “鳥人” which is also slang for “Fucker,” but I’d much rather a Rick and Morty reference than getting vulgar on you guys though.

Skinny Strip awkwardly chuckled. “You definitely won’t find me doing something that stupid. Forget it, let’s rest some more. We still get experience either way.”

They chatted in a relaxed manner, completely unaware of the imminent danger.

Nie Yan and Sun snuck up on the group. Their daggers flickered with a cold light while hidden within the shadows.

The Unhindered players in the distance were leisurely fighting the mobs.

Following the plan Nie Yan drew up earlier, Edgeless, Monochrome, Undying Scoundrel, and the others were already in position.

Seeing that everyone was ready, Nie Yan shouted in the party

intercom.「KILL!」

All ten players moved in unison.

Nie Yan pounced on Bird Person. His actions were lightning-quick, and his dagger pierced through the air, streaking towards the back of the target's head in a brilliant flash of light.

Smothering Strike!

Bird Person suddenly felt something odd, as if an alarm bell was going off in his head. It was an enemy attack!

But before he could even get up, it was long over. After stunning him, Nie Yan ended his life with a slash to the throat.

Bird Person went limp and collapsed to the ground!

In a panic, the Mages in the group stumbled to their feet.

Nie Yan turned, dashing towards them. With a Vital Strike, he stabbed one of them in the neck.

It was a critical hit! The target was instagibbed!

Another Mage fell to the ground. Nie Yan moved on to his next target. He activated Assassinate, stabbing the third Mage in the

stomach, and promptly followed up with Lacerate, disemboweling him. The Mage let out a shocked gasp, mouth wide open in horror as two huge damage values floated up above his head. He crumpled to the ground like a wet rag.

On the other side, Sun's movements weren't slow either. He took down one of the Mages with a Dashing Strike, then pounced on the last member of the group that wanted to escape. With a Smothering Strike followed by Assassinate, his dagger pierced through the cloth armour protecting the Mage's chest, causing him to drop dead!

From the moment Nie Yan and Sun emerged to them taking down all five Mages, no more than a few seconds had passed. It was practically like a flash of lightning or the strike of a matchstick! They were direct and efficient.

Nie Yan and Sun reactivated Stealth and dashed towards the next group of squishy targets. In particular, they aimed for the Priests!

Meanwhile, from every direction, Monochrome, Edgeless, Blue Yarn Thread, and Resplendent Bladelight were each charging down a slope. Clad from head to toe in thick plate armour, they resembled tanks as they steamrolled through all obstacles.

“Heroic Strike!” Edgeless roared. The blow sent a Mage flying outwards. Flame Slash! His blazing greatsword transformed a Priest into rays of light. He resembled a god of slaughter, tearing through everything in his path. In the blink of an eye, he had already killed six players. Who could've imagined that this normally reserved boy would release such a formidable,

murderous aura in the middle of battle!

The others weren't weak either. As they slaughtered a path open, unimpeded, a head would roll with every ten steps taken. They swept up everything before them!

Numerous spells ruthlessly bombarded them, streaking through the air like tongues of fire. Yet they were fearless, radiating an awe-inspiring aura.

Blue Yarn Thread fetched an Intermediate Health Potion from his bag. Drinking it, his health instantly restored to full. Divine Strike! His sword lit up, shining with a brilliant light, as he cleaved a Priest in half. He also cast a Lesser Heal on Monochrome.

All the while, Leader Young Seven never stopped supporting them from the rear. Rays of gentle light fell over them. On top of the healing from the Health Potions, they didn't lose the slightest bit of momentum under the concentrated bombardment of magic.

In a short span of time, more than twenty Unhindered players died!

Seeing these ten players that seemed to resemble living embodiments of death, the nearby Mages felt their insides churn in horror, as they frantically turned tail and fled.

“The enemy is attacking!”

“It’s Asskickers United!”

As the Mages in the backline cried out for help, the Warriors who were holding off the Molten Rock Monsters hastily turned back to rescue them.

Charge! Charge!

With no one locking the Molten Rock Monsters down, they charged out into the fray. It was a scene of utter chaos. A few Molten Rock Monsters sent several Mages flying with a sweep of their enormous forelimbs.

The players moved about the area hectically. While the Mages wanted to flee, the Warriors wanted to rush in. On top of that, the Warriors had unintentionally brought several dozen Molten Rock Monsters with them.

On a nearby hilltop, Miracle Dancer killed a Mage who ran over in his direction with a Holy Smite and a Holy Strike. He turned to Undying Scoundrel beside him and asked, “Are you done yet? It’s been so long already. How are you still not finished!?”

A horrifying, boundless amount of fire elemental energy was gathering around Undying Scoundrel. It was enough to make anyone pale with fright.

Blowhard Summer Bug cast an Arcane Flame Burst followed up with an Arcane Fireball at an enemy in the distance.「Bang!」They

were sent flying. He made short work of them!

Witnessing the deluge of fire elemental energy flooding towards Undying Scoundrel, the nearby Unhindered Mages wore blank expressions. Giving up all hope, they turned tail and ran, despising the fact that they couldn't grow another pair of legs.

Just where did these bunch of killing gods come from!?

Undying Scoundrel was still in the middle of casting a frightening area-of-effect spell, and at this point, no one was capable of stopping him. The Unhindered players were running around like headless chickens. Most of them didn't have the mind to notice Undying Scoundrel on the hilltop. Some Paladins more mindful of their surroundings charged over, wanting to kill him, but they were all blasted away by the magic of Miracle Dancer and Blowhard Summer Bug.

Nie Yan and Sun also gave a hand, clearing away any player who drummed up enough courage to try and stop Undying Scoundrel.

「Edgeless, Monochrome, get out of the way!」

「Bladelight, Blue Yarn Thread, quickly retreat!」

After the four of them received the early warning, Edgeless, Monochrome, and Bladelight activated Charge, fleeing the area. Blue Yarn Thread activated Indomitable Will. He wasn't the slightest bit slower than the three Warriors. The four quickly

withdrew from the battlefield.

In that moment, Undying Scoundrel finished making two sets of incantation gestures and chanting two sets of incantation syllables. An enormous sphere of fire emerged over the battlefield. It churned and rolled before smashing down to the ground like a giant meteor.「BOOM!」A massive explosion engulfed the several dozen Warriors from Unhindered caught at the center of the spell. After the giant sphere of fire struck the earth, it blossomed into countless embers that rained down on the players in the surroundings.

It was gorgeous like a display of fireworks in the evening.

The scattered embers were the same as Fireballs, killing over sixty Unhindered players at once and scorching the earth clean of any life.

The raging fires of hell would devour every creature in its path.

After the flames subsided, only ten or so players remained, somehow surviving by a lucky fluke. Staring at the land swept clean of life, they wore foolish expressions.

Almost nothing was left, save for a giant crater that was made by the impact of Hellfire. The nearby surroundings were burnt black. Over sixty players were killed all at once. Not even the twenty or so Molten Rock Monsters were spared. They were turned into ashes, swept up by the blowing wind. Not a single trace of them could be seen.

What a dreadful spell!

If this sort of spell was used in a large-scale battle, as soon as the giant sphere of fire fell, at least six to seven hundred players would perish!

From being completely white, Undying Scoundrel's name was instantly branded a deep crimson. It was breathtaking.

His kill count was sixty-seven!

"Damn! You're going to be famous! That Hellfire brought you to a whole new level of red names!" Blowhard Summer Bug cried out.

"What an awesome spell..." Miracle Dancer was almost speechless. Hellfire was simply too frightening. It was his first time witnessing the destructive might of an advanced magic.

The ten or so survivors wanted to run, but Nie Yan and the others quickly caught up to them. Blood-curdling screams rang out, filling the air. Most of them died trying to escape. They were simply no match for Nie Yan's group in terms of speed.

In just two to three minutes, nothing was left of the group of one hundred Unhindered Players.

They had killed a ghastly number of people. Besides Leader

Young Seven, everyone else had red names!

“How many escaped?” Nie Yan asked.

“Two!”

“Did you record the video?” Nie Yan asked Blowhard Summer Bug. He had the best view up on the hilltop. There, he was able to get a clear picture of the events on the entire battlefield.

“Recorded!” Blowhard Summer Bug nodded.

“Good! Now we can post a reply to those Unhindered players calling us out on the forums.” Nie Yan coldly smiled. This was the most effective way to strike back at Victorious Return and Unhindered!

Only a hundred players were killed. This was merely the beginning!

Chapter 198 – Field Of Corpses

The official forums were abuzz with activity because of the provocative video released by Unhindered.

The players from Unhindered frequently jeered at Asskickers United in discussions related to the video. Even though the members of Asskickers United would attempt to refute, they simply lacked the ammunition to fire back. Numerous members expressed dissatisfaction over how the executives of the guild handled the situation, or rather the lack thereof. Many of them were so riled up that they were itching to start a massacre in Kiln Fire Woods.

But very soon, a response was posted to the video. It was another video along with a few brief sentences.

It was a recording of Nie Yan and the other nine members slaughtering a large group of Unhindered players.

「10:09, Players Killed: 153. Asskickers United doesn't rely on an advantage in numbers. Ten of us are enough to massacre Unhindered!」

A hair-raising video followed by a domineering reply! It sent shock waves rippling through the community. It depicted Warriors and Paladins sweeping through everything before them, Thieves taking lives like they were reaping wheat, and Mages dealing damage that would make people faint from fright! Most awe-inspiring of all was the part where Undying Scoundrel annihilated

over sixty players in a flash with Hellfire. It was truly breathtaking!

Nie Yan's group mowed through the players from Unhindered like they were chopping up fruits and vegetables!

They displayed an unprecedented degree of skill in PvP! It couldn't help but draw sighs of admiration.

What a powerful group of individuals!

Was that really the might of Asskickers United?

The words paired along with the video carried a bit of suspense. It ignited even further discussions among the players on the forums.

10:09, 153 players killed... Did that imply that the vengeance of Asskickers United was far from over?

The line that followed got many people fired up. Asskickers United doesn't rely on an advantage in numbers! It was a brutal slap to the face of Unhindered. So what if they ambushed the main team of Asskickers United? It took a thousand of them to deal with twenty players! Even then, some of their targets still managed to get out alive. Was that really worth bragging about? The opinions on the forums quickly changed. Asskickers United retrieved its honour.

The implication was clear: Just 10 of our members killed over 150 of your players! Let's see if you can still act so arrogantly now!

Finally, there was the overbearing declaration at the end. Ten of us are enough to massacre Unhindered!

Could ten people really massacre all of Unhindered?

Everyone was eager to find out.

The community immediately brought the reply video to the top of the forums with their lively discussion. It was shared and posted elsewhere countless times, often labeled with various eye-catching titles.

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「The Ten Slaughter Gods!」

「Ten Massacre a Hundred, Piling up a Field of Corpses!」

「The Might of Asskickers United!」

...

Such posts were by no means an uncommon sight.

The players of Asskickers United were very demoralized. Many of them couldn't even bear to check the official forums anymore. Every once in a while, a few people had the urge to go and sling some insults back but they just couldn't bring themselves to actually do it. They felt consumed by sadness, and the inaction of the guild executives served to dishearten them further.

All of that changed in this moment. The video released by Nie Yan and the others was a cool breeze blowing through their hearts, sweeping away all the bitterness and disappointment. In its place, they found indescribable excitement. Some of them were so moved that they started shedding tears of joy. The higher-ups finally made a move!

The members of Asskickers cared greatly for their guild. They didn't wish for it to become the laughing-stock of the community.

When the guild members watched the video, their hearts burned with an even more ardent fervor. This was because Guo Huai told them that Victorious Return and Unhindered had laid out a trap in Kiln Fire Woods. The entire guild mobilizing to retaliate was exactly what the enemy wanted. So Nirvana Flame and the other higher-ups came to a decision. They would massacre Unhindered with only ten people!

The players of Asskickers United firmly imprinted the images of Nie Yan and the other nine members into their minds. These ten people, without help from any outside force, restored their faith in the guild.

The guild chat flooded with words of support for Nie Yan and the

others.

「Nirvana Flame is awesome!」

「We're going to duke it out with Victorious Return and Unhindered. Whoever's afraid is a son of a bitch!」

「We should all go there! Let's massacre Victorious Return and Unhindered!」

The guild members were impassioned. The guild had so many people levelling outside, yet they sent ten members out on a suicide mission. How could they just sit still and watch?

「Enough! Are you guys idiots!? Do you want to die? Did you all just forget what I told you? I want you to settle your asses down! No one's going anywhere. Keep levelling where you are. When you're needed, Nirvana Flame will naturally call on you!」Guo Huai scolded in the guild chat. He managed to quell them for the time being, but he could still sense their smoldering enthusiasm.

Players would regularly check the official forums, paying close attention to any new developments. No one knew whether Nie Yan's group would end up dying or actually succeed in massacring all of Unhindered. Regardless of the outcome, their feats would be talked about for a long time to come.

Near the borders of Kiln Fire Woods, Hei Zhuo was getting jittery. His heart was welling up with an indescribable feeling of

nervousness. It didn't make sense that there were still no signs of movement. It was at this moment that he received an update from a subordinate. He was informed of the over a hundred casualties they suffered. Asskickers United had retaliated!

「How many of them are there?」Hei Zhuo asked, feeling a hint of uneasiness.

「There were only ten!」

「Are you telling me over a hundred of you were killed by only ten people!?」Hei Zhuo yelled, sounding extremely flustered.

Standing beside him, Yu Long said, “Check the forums.”

Hei Zhuo opened up the forums. Posted at the top was a response from Asskickers United. Playing the video, he recognized Bladelight on the screen at a glance. He was familiar with the faces of Nie Yan and the others as well. However, what surprised him was that they were just as skilled as Bladelight. When did Asskickers United get so many amazing players!?

Yu Long was also taken aback. If any of those ten were pulled into Victorious Return, they would easily rank among the top five players in the guild! He was astonished. It seemed he had vastly underestimated the clout of Asskickers United.

「Report the coordinates of where you last saw them! I want all forces over there immediately! Exterminate them!」Hei Zhuo was

enraged after reading through some of the comments below the video.

Yu Long wondered how Nie Yan's group got past the Unhindered's tight blockade to enter the inner regions of Kiln Fire Woods. Did they have some sort of secret route or special method?

Don't tell me they made their way through the underground lava caverns!? No, it's not very likely. Yu Long shook his head. Not many players dared to enter that place. Several guilds had sent out scouting teams to explore the underground map before, but all of them were wiped out without exception. He felt confident that no one was foolish enough to throw their lives away by entering such a dangerous, unexplored area.

Did Nie Yan's group get past them unnoticed by drinking Invisibility Potions? That was the more likely possibility.

"Tell the Priests to cast Illuminate. They probably have Invisibility Potions!" Yu Long said to Hei Zhuo.

Hei Zhuo thought for a moment, then nodded, passing down the orders to his subordinates.

The seven to eight thousand members of Unhindered at the outskirts of Kiln Fire Woods all moved towards the inner region.

In the deepest parts of Kiln Fire Woods, the annihilation of the hundred-man group immediately alerted the two other groups in

the vicinity, causing them to become restless. Some of the players wanted to retreat until backup arrived. Others wanted to hunt Nie Yan's group down. However, before any of them could come to a decision, several figures appeared in their vision.

After picking up all the spoils of battle, Nie Yan and the others had rushed to the next target.

The first to take action were obviously the two Thieves, Nie Yan and Sun.

Nie Yan snuck up behind a Level 20 Paladin who was at the edge of the fifty-man group. Near him was a small group of six melee-class players. They were about to withdraw from the area with a larger group of players.

The Awareness of the Paladin clearly wasn't very high. He was oblivious to Nie Yan's approach.

Nie Yan struck the Paladin in the back of the head with Smothering Strike, stunning him.

Vital Strike! Nie Yan slashed his throat.

-253

-428 !

The Paladin didn't even get a chance to react before collapsing to

the ground.

Nie Yan smirked. After getting his attack power up, he could even handle plate-armoured classes with ease.

“Shit! It’s a Thief!”

“Surround him!”

The six nearby melee-class players finally reacted. Charge! They rushed forward, wanting to murder Nie Yan. A silver-armoured Berserker among them led the charge.

Nie Yan pulled back. However, bolstered by the speed boost of Charge, the Berserker quickly caught up.

Tendon Break! Afraid of being stunned by this Thief with terrifying damage, the silver-armored Berserker tried to cripple his movements. But who could’ve anticipated that the opponent was already one step ahead of him.

Concussive Blow! Nie Yan stunned him with Concussive Blow, then circled behind to avoid the Tendon Break. Backstab! Eviscerate! The Berserker’s health disappeared in an instant.

The Priests and Paladins behind the Berserker didn’t even get a chance to cast a Heal!

One fighter rushed up to Nie Yan from the front, and two Berserkers flanked him from both sides. They were attempting to surround him. Nie Yan activated Shadow Dance, disappearing from their sight.

“Did he run?”

The three Warriors were at a loss after failing to intercept Nie Yan. They vigilantly surveyed their surroundings a while longer before finally turning around and giving up. Within a second of them putting their weapons down, Nie Yan reappeared behind one of the Berserkers and stabbed him in the back. [Blast!](#)「Bang!」Splitting Edge exploded with energy, sending the Berserker flying out like a ragdoll.

Although there wasn't much energy stored up, Nie Yan's attack power had reached a terrifyingly high degree. Even a weak Blast would instantly kill the average Berserker.

Before any of the Berserker's companions could react, Nie Yan melded into their surroundings and disappeared.

Several of them nearly wet their pants from fright. Fearing Nie Yan would appear again, they quickly retreated. Only when they joined up with the main group did they feel a little bit safer.

“Big Brother, how many did you kill?” Sun also returned safely after carrying out an ambush.

“Three.”

“I killed three too!” Sun exclaimed. However, after looking over at the three corpses in the distance, his face was tinged with a bit of red. Nie Yan took down Warriors and Paladins while all his targets were Mages and Priests.

“Not bad!” Nie Yan nodded in approval.

Monochrome, Edgeless, and the others blew the battle horn on the other side of the battle. They charged into the group of players and started a unilateral slaughter.

“Divine Strike!” Blue Yarn Thread sent a Berserker Flying. Clad in silver-white armour, he could even crush a Warrior.

“Whirlwind Slash!” Monochrome spun around like a top, knocking down the six players surrounding him. Wearing armour that boosted damage and carrying a greatsword that increased critical rate, he was like a heavy-duty tank, tearing across the battlefield. He was invincible.

Undying Scoundrel cast spell after spell, causing explosions to go off everywhere, littering the ground with corpses. Blowhard Summer Bug cast the area-of-effect spell, Firestorm. Immediately, a raging cyclone of fire appeared over the area, swallowing up over ten players.

A group of over fifty players was reduced to a little more than ten. None of the survivors had the willpower to resist. They all fled in every direction.

Nie Yan and Sun gave chase, killing another five players. In the end, six players got away through a fluke of luck.

Nie Yan updated the post on the forums:

「10:17, Players Killed: 201」

Chapter 199 – Names Red As Blood

The last of the three groups in the vicinity, which had 60 Unhindered players, rushed over while Nie Yan's team was still picking off the survivors. They were here to provide support, confident that the other group would be able to hold out for a while against the attack. However, they didn't expect that by the time they arrived, the situation would be completely different from what they expected. Over fifty members of Unhindered had been utterly annihilated by ten people.

The names of Nie Yan and the others were branded a deep, blood red. It was like walking into a murder scene.

Nie Yan suddenly disappeared. With his fastest speed, he dashed toward the group of reinforcements like a lightning bolt before emerging among their ranks. Under the gaze of over sixty pairs of eyes, he streaked the blade of his dagger across a Priest's throat with a Vital Strike. The victim's health bar plummeted to zero as they collapsed to the ground.

The crowd of players were badly frightened. Nie Yan was previously several dozen meters away. In the blink of an eye, he closed that distance and killed one of their Priests. It all happened way too quickly!

What shocked many of them was the deep crimson of his name. Just how many people did he kill!?

The immediate reaction of the nearby players was to retreat. The

Mages cast a shower of spells, whizzing towards Nie Yan.「Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!」They battered him ruthlessly, exploding on impact.

However, Nie Yan held an overwhelming advantage in both level and defense. The spells from the Mages couldn't put a dent on him, dealing only ten or so damage each.

Nie Yan didn't retreat in the slightest, enduring the concentrated bombardment of spells. He dashed forward and mowed down two Mages with the slash of his dagger. At this point, only a sliver of his health remained. Just as he was about to pull back to recuperate before reentering the fray, a Heal from Leader Young Seven enveloped his body, restoring his health to full.

Nie Yan was too accustomed to playing alone. He forgot that a powerful Priest was supporting him from the rear. With the aid of this limitless health pack, what was there to be afraid of? Giving his cooldowns a quick glance, he stunned a Warrior with Concussive Blow, then finished them off with a Backstab followed by Eviscerate.

Nie Yan's damage was simply too ferocious. Was he really a Thief?

Edgeless, Monochrome, and the others finally caught up with him. Like a wedge, they drove themselves into the group of enemies, and commenced a slaughter.

When the Warriors of Unhindered ran into Edgeless, Monochrome, or Bladelight, they could only scatter!

Blowhard Summer Bug, Undying Scoundrel, and Miracle Dancer bombarded the enemy with spells, blasting numerous Unhindered players into the air.

“How many have you guys killed?” Blowhard Summer Bug asked as he fired an Arcane Flame Burst at a Warrior.「Boom!」The Warrior didn't know what hit him as he was sent flying.

“22!” Monochrome replied, cutting down a Mage.

“I'm on 27!” Edgeless said after taking a glimpse at his kill count.

“I've killed 89! Haha! I'm the king of killing!” Undying Scoundrel proudly exclaimed. Freeze! He froze a nearby Warrior in place, then moved to finish him off with another spell. However, a Holy Smite blasted the him away.

“Fuck! Boss, they're kill stealing me!” Undying Scoundrel whined.

Miracle Dancer shrugged his shoulders. With a smug look, he said, “You've already killed the most out of all of us. One or two less isn't going to make a difference.”

Blue Yarn Thread cast Heal on Monochrome. He didn't particularly care about who had the higher kill count. As a Paladin, he was fine with taking down the enemy while providing the occasional support with blessings and heals.

The tankiest member of the group, Bladelight, didn't take down as many players. However, he more than made up for this by being a near immovable object, grabbing the attention of many Unhindered players. The more attacks he absorbed, the less pressure there was on his companions.

Nie Yan and Sun killed fewer players in comparison, but both of them still had kill counts of almost twenty.

After the slaughter was over, the battlefield was littered with the corpses of Unhindered players, and those who were lucky enough to survive had all already fled. It was now eerily empty.

"Boss, what are we going to do next?" Edgeless asked. The players they'd encountered so far were not part of the main force. They were stomping on weaklings. It was as simple as slicing vegetables.

"Pick up the loot and then we'll leave!" Nie Yan said. Unhindered's main force would definitely be arriving soon. They needed to withdraw quickly.

They moved across the battlefield, collecting the spoils of battle. Although the drops were all Level 15–20 equipment with mediocre properties, the lower-levelled guild members badly needed them. Asskickers United had plenty of high-level items, but it sorely lacked low-level ones, leaving the guild unable to satisfy the needs of the ordinary members.

The loot was quickly picked up, and Nie Yan's group reentered the lava caverns.

Not much later, the post on the forums was updated.

「10:25, Players Killed: 257」

The ten-man strike force of Asskickers United was still killing. Moreover, the number of people they killed was steadily climbing higher and higher. Every time the kill count was updated, the players on the forums would be filled with shock and fear. It was truly too eye-catching.

Although Asskickers United was expanding at a rapid pace, they were still widely regarded as a newly established guild without a stable foundation. No one believed they could hold up against a behemoth like Victorious Return. However, today's developments caused them to be seen in a new light. Asskickers United really did have quite some formidable players. They probably weren't even all that far off from large guilds like Victorious Return.

Aside from Leader Young Seven who was a Priest, everyone else in the group was branded with appallingly red names. They were practically a bunch of killing gods!

The guild leader of Unhindered, Hei Zhuo, was burning with unimaginable fury. After Nie Yan's group had forcefully taken back the initiative, he found himself in a very precarious situation.

Now the one stuck in a difficult dilemma was Unhindered!

They had no means of an out. If they abandoned their chase on Nie Yan's group and returned to Calore, then Asskickers United could arrogantly proclaim that Unhindered had been scared into retreat by a mere ten players. Unhindered would lose all face!

Hei Zhuo's only hope was to track Nie Yan's group down and kill them to rid themselves of the disgrace. His anger reached sky-high levels. Under his orders, the area where Nie Yan's group was located was completely sealed off and surrounded. Not even an ant would be able to pass through.

Since Nie Yan's group was branded with red names, they wouldn't be able to return to the city. If they were killed, they would drop all their equipment and many levels. Hei Zhuo's eyes flashed with a cold light. Only with such an outcome would his hatred be abated.

The players from Unhindered quickly gathered at the inner regions of Kiln Fire Woods. They left no stone unturned, doing a thorough sweep of the area.

Almost eight thousand players gathered here. No matter how valiant Nie Yan's group was, if they encountered such a large mob of bloodthirsty players, they would be exterminated.

These players inspected every inch of land, but after a full thirty minutes, they still came up empty. All they found were the remnants of the earlier battles. Most distinctly, the large crater

created by Hellfire that had yet to recover.

The entire area was empty, lacking any trace of Nie Yan's group.

"Where are they!?" Hei Zhuo roared in anger. His guild members cast fearful glances in his direction, none daring to reply.

They had undoubtedly scoured through every inch of the area. What did they miss? Where did Nie Yan's group disappear off to?

Hei Zhuo was like an enraged lion, roaring at everyone around him, when he received a message Nie Yan's group had appeared to the north. They fled after killing ten players.

"Surround them! I want them all dead! Tell the Thieves to follow them. No matter what, do not let them get away!" Hei Zhuo immediately led the large crowd of players north.

Nie Yan's group travelled through the tunnels of the lava caverns, evading Unhindered's forces. They would ambush an unsuspecting group, then quickly retreat, easily shaking off any pursuers.

"You guys go first. Wait for me up ahead! Sun, act as a lookout for me. If you see anyone approach, immediately report back to me," Nie Yan instructed.

"Alright!" Sun nodded.

“Boss, what about you?”

“I’ll join up with you guys in a bit. Let me take care of those Thieves trailing us first!” Nie Yan replied before entering stealth.

Nie Yan looked at Young Seven who nodded his head in response.

Eight of them ran ahead, leaving Nie Yan and Young Seven behind to deal with the Thieves.

Nie Yan immediately sensed seven Thieves approaching. He quickly locked down on their positions.

When the group of Thieves arrived, they found a Priest, Young Seven, all alone. They stealthily moved toward him.

「To the left at 7 o’clock!」Nie Yan said to Young Seven in the intercom.

Young Seven cast illuminate. A shining ball of light floated up into the air. The dazzling radiance covered the sky like a pool of mercury. Under the flood of light, it revealed three silhouettes.

“Shit, we’ve been discovered. Kill him!”

Nie Yan suddenly appeared behind them. With Smothering Strike followed by Assassinate, he instantly killed one of them,

then pounced onto his next target. A Backstab and Eviscerate made short work of them.

His methods were direct and efficient.

The third Thief rushed toward Young Seven. However, they came to a halt five meters from their target.

Nie Yan activated Shadow Steps. He was much faster than the enemy Thief. Within the blink of an eye, he caught up and plunged his dagger deep into their back.

The Thief didn't expect Nie Yan to be so fast. They activated Stealth, disappearing from Nie Yan's view. However, seconds later they reemerged as a body collapsing to the ground.

Both Nie Yan's Splitting Edge and Scarlet Poison Ring inflicted debuffs that dealt damage over time. Even though they were merely DOT effects, these Thieves couldn't endure them.

At this moment, four Thieves pounced toward Young Seven. Young Seven activated Illuminate, revealing their locations. He cast Fear, causing the closest Thief to involuntarily retreat. He cast Cripple and Ache, cursing one of the other Thieves whose speed was immediately reduced.

「Peng! Peng!」Two light arrows struck the Thief, chunking away half of their health.

The two other Thieves were still closing in on Young Seven. Very soon, he was going to suffer the attacks of both of them. Concussive Blow! Nie Yan arrived in time, stunning one of the two Thieves whom he finished off with Vital Strike.

Young Seven put up a Radiant Barrier, then self-cast a Resistance Blessing, blocking the fourth Thief's Concussive Blow. With a Holy Flame Burst, he sent them flying.

Nie Yan raised his dagger, cleaning up the feared Thief.

The last remaining Thief wanted to run but Young Seven didn't give them the chance. He handled the Thief quickly.

"Your PvP skills are pretty good," Nie Yan praised. He was genuinely surprised. He didn't expect Young Seven to be so strong. Who said Priests couldn't PvP?

"It's nothing." Young Seven smirked, scratching his nose.

Chapter 200 – The Master Emerges

Nie Yan thought highly of everyone he recruited, but he still underestimated the skill of the players under him. Leader Young Seven, for example, was normally consigned to the role of a support and rarely ever seen engaging in direct combat. Nie Yan was never clear on how good Young Seven was at PvP. Today, however, he witnessed Young Seven's prowess first-hand.

In the face of imminent death from an ambush by four Thieves, Young Seven hadn't shown the slightest trace of panic. He feared the closest Thief, crippled the second with curses, and resisted being incapacitated by the third with a shield and blessing. Relying on skill alone, he had effortlessly dealt with three Thieves.

Nie Yan felt Young Seven even rivalled some Mages who were experts at PvP. He previously believed that as long as Young Seven could hold out for at least ten seconds, he would be able to take out those several Thieves and rescue him. However, Young Seven had shown that he was perfectly capable of taking care of himself. Only now did Nie Yan gain a better understanding of what Young Seven could truly do. He was one of the Seven Archbishops in the previous timeline after all. It would be strange if he didn't have the ability to defend himself.

Only when a Priest reached the same as stage as Young Seven, where they were not afraid of PvP, would they start to truly grow. If they had to rely on someone to save them whenever they encountered danger, they would forever linger in mediocrity.

“There'll be more of them arriving soon. Let's run while we still

can,” Nie Yan said. There was no time to pick up the equipment from the ground. The players from Unhindered weren’t likely to drop anything good anyway.

By relying on his understanding of the terrain, Ne Yan and the others passed through the underground lava caverns periodically, popping out of the woods to launch ambushes. They were playing a game of cat and mouse, and Unhindered was helpless to stop them.

Nie Yan and the others were in a murderous frenzy, slaughtering countless players from Unhindered.

The post on the official forums was constantly receiving updates:

「10:29, Players Killed: 278」

「10:58, Players Killed: 308」

「11:27, Players Killed: 323」

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Although the number of players dying in the recent updates wasn’t as terrifying as the first two, it was still extremely astonishing. While the kill count was steadily rising, Nie Yan’s group had yet to lose a single member. If the players on the forums only felt slight admiration for them before, now many of them came to genuinely revere Nie Yan and the other members of the group. Ten people were actually able to force an entire guild into

such a powerless situation. Asskickers United truly struck dread into the hearts of all.

The players of Unhindered grew paranoid after every successive ambush. They were filled with fear and trepidation, not knowing when or where the enemy would strike next.

Nie Yan and the others were like spectres, taking out anywhere from ten to twenty plus players every time they appeared. When more forces arrived to surround them, all traces of them would disappear.

“Shit! How do they keep escaping?!” Hei Zhuo cursed. He was consumed by unending fury, while also feeling utterly helpless as he watched the number of casualties continue to rise.

Yu Long calmly pondered over the question. What Nie Yan’s group had done couldn’t simply be accomplished with Invisibility Potions. The answer probably laid beneath the ground. Could they have found some method to pass through the lava caverns?

The forces of Unhindered were too weak and spread too thin, leaving them incapable of controlling the entire map. From the start, they had no way to resist the ambushes of Nie Yan’s group. Unhindered was in a precarious position, unable to retreat or advance. If they withdrew from Kiln Fire Woods, they would become even more of a laughingstock.

Since this matter was plotted by Victorious Return, they would undoubtedly be humiliated as well. Even a blind person could tell

that they were pulling the strings from behind the scenes. After this was all over, the reputation of Victorious Return would reach the lowest point, while their enemy would benefit greatly. If enough time was given to Asskickers United, then Victorious Return really might be forced to abdicate their throne as the top guild in Calore.

Yu Long thought for a moment. If he continued to allow Unhindered to be tormented like this, the number of people killed by Nie Yan's group would only rise higher and higher. Once the total casualties surpassed a thousand, it would undoubtedly be a victory for Asskickers United! A thousand players dead! He could scarcely imagine what sort of reaction the players on the forums would have.

Yu Long consulted with Heaven Breaker. When the time came for Victorious Return to act, even if Nie Yan's group couldn't be surrounded, they would at least have to be driven away. They couldn't be allowed to run rampant in Kiln Fire Woods any longer!

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Nie Yan and the others killed around ten more players before withdrawing. The safety of every member of the group took the highest precedence. They never lingered around for long, leaving shortly after picking up all the loot.

Suddenly, Nie Yan received a message notification.

「You guys need to get out of Kiln Fire Woods, quickly!」Guo Huai

warned urgently.

「What's the matter?」Nie Yan asked. Unless something big happened, Guo Huai would never sound so anxious.

「A large force of players from Victorious Return is mobilizing in Kiln Fire Woods. They're moving towards your direction!」Guo Huai sounded flustered. Right now, he couldn't help but be anxious about the safety of Nie Yan's group. Whatever happened to them would affect the entire guild.

Nie Yan's eyes flashed with a desire to commit murder. It wasn't easy for him to create such a large stir, but he finally forced Victorious Return to act. Unhindered was nothing more than a lackey, merely an appetizer before the main course. No matter how many of them he killed, it would never deal a serious blow to Victorious Return. Now that the dog was beaten, the master had emerged.

「Don't worry. We won't be caught so easily.」Nie Yan coldly chuckled. He casually glanced at the guild chat. It was filled with the messages of countless members showing their support for him and the others, as well as telling them to all come back.

「Boss! Please, all of you should return! To everyone in the guild, the safety of you and the others is the most important thing. You've already killed over 500 of the bastards from Unhindered. You guys are the glory of our guild!」- Paladin of the Elegy

「Boss, please come back soon. We all miss you...」- Sugar Cane

...

Although the guild members no longer had any thoughts of charging into Kiln Fire Woods thanks to the repeated reminders from Guo Huai, they were all still extremely concerned about the safety of Nie Yan's group.

As Nie Yan looked through all these messages, the corner of his mouth curved into a smile.

"Victorious Return's forces are coming?" Young Seven asked.

Nie Yan nodded.

"How many?" Bladelight asked. He didn't expect them to arrive so soon.

"Around 20,000 to 30,000," Nie Yan replied. With such a large force arriving, he estimated they would be able to cover all of Kiln Fire Woods. It would basically become impossible for his group to launch any more sneak attacks.

There were so many enemy players securing the map. If they dared to mount another ambush, the nearby forces would quickly arrive to surround them. Where could they possibly run then?

He wasn't foolish enough to use a chicken's egg to crack a stone.

“Should we go back now?” Young Seven asked. Taking a step back was also a type of strategy. They had already achieved great results. Withdrawing now would still be a win for them. However, if all ten of them were wiped out, then the outside world would view such an outcome as Victorious Return turning the tables on them.

Each of them killed at least 50 players, some even over 100. If they died now, they would all drop at least five or six levels. It was a loss they couldn't afford to take.

“I'll send you guys back,” Nie Yan said with a smile. They were the top elites of the guild. Asskickers United would suffer a tremendous blow if they died.

Young Seven and the others wrinkled their brows at the meaning behind those words. Nie Yan wouldn't be going back with them? He was planning on staying behind?

“What are you going to do?” Bladelight asked. Nie Yan wasn't planning on dealing with Victorious Return all by himself, right?

“Don't worry about me. I won't treat my level and equipment as a joke,” Nie Yan reassured. He had long since formulated a plan. His previous actions were merely a precursor to the main event.

Victorious Return would truly feel the wrath of Asskickers United!

「Nie Yan, we've located their main team! They're doing the Shadow Marsh dungeon right now!」Guo Huai said in an excited tone. It wasn't easy for him to grasp the movements of Victorious Return's main team, but he had discovered them just as they were about to start Shadow Marsh.

「Has the task force been formed yet?」Nie Yan asked. He didn't think Guo Huai was able to work so quickly.

「No, not yet. But I've already gathered over fifty players. They're all Thieves who've shown decent skill in the past. Although the task force still isn't fully formed yet, I think they should be more than enough to deal with Victorious Return's main team. Even if we can't completely annihilate them, we can still peel off a layer of skin. That'll let them know that we aren't so easy to bully!」Guo Huai said with confidence. Every single one of these fifty-some-odd Thieves was a top ranking player. All of them signed contracts with the guild, and were already outfitted with the very best equipment the guild had to offer. Their PvP abilities absolutely were by no means weak either.

「Don't be rash. If you can't find a suitable opportunity, then so be it. We don't want to alert the enemy too early,」Nie Yan reminded him. Since Victorious Return dared to move against them, it was safe to assume that the main team of Victorious Return was already on high alert for any counter-offensives. They wouldn't be an easy target to surround, let alone annihilate. If Asskickers United was going to deal a blow to Victorious Return, it needed to be decisive!

「Alright, I understand,」Guo Huai replied.

Nie Yan's group entered the lava caverns, then headed toward an exit outside of Kiln Fire Woods.

“You guys have to be careful. You'll probably encounter Victorious Return players on the road. It's best if you guys found a safe spot to hide first,” Nie Yan cautioned Young Seven and the others. Then he turned to Sun and said, “You have to pay extra attention to your surroundings. You're the only Thief in the group, so it's your job to guide them safely. Be extra cautious when you scout ahead!”

Sun nodded, a resolute expression on his face. “Big Brother, you can put your faith in me!”

“If all of us get out alive, I bet the people from Victorious Return will be fuming so much that smoke will come out of their heads!” Blowhard Summer Bug said with a smile. The atmosphere around them lightened significantly.

“We did great on this operation. We killed 567 enemies without a single casualty!” Undying Scoundrel exclaimed.

As the group travelled through the dark tunnels of the lava caverns, the heat from the churning magma below the ground they walked on boiled the very air around them.

“This place is too damn hot!” Monochrome and the others

grumbled.

“It’s a great spot.” Nie Yan smiled mysteriously but didn’t explain any further.

The many Viper Flies backed away as Nie Yan’s group passed through. Soon, they left the vicinity of Kiln Fire Woods and arrived near the exit just outside of the map.